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DANTE FALOO

SUSPENSE-PACKED THRILLER BY

MARION GEORGE

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No. 5

May
1957
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To the devil with renegade whiskey peddlers and raiding Comanches—Jud Franklin, by Judas, was going to get help for his young wife....

THEY'VE seen me, Jud Franklin thought. *They've seen me and I know I was cutting away from their tracks. They'll have to kill me now to shut me up. Cugat and his damn renegade whiskey peddlers.*

Jud knew that his very urgency had betrayed him. In his sweat to get to the Holder farm he'd cut his circle too short after finding the still and empty demijohns in the ravine. But he had to get the farm woman with all possible speed and get back to Lettie. After the fall this noon, his young wife might even now be in labor. Jud had to get to Liz Holder and then go on to Buckley Cornors for the doctor.

He cursed Cugat and his whiskey peddlers, and the buzzards that had caused him to find the dead dog and the still. But he couldn't afford to take chances either in this time of full moon and the Comanches raiding.

If he'd only taken the extra few minutes to ride the branch and the cover there, instead of cutting across this bald patch of prairie....

Damn Cugat to hell. He ought to have his big gut cut open and filled with redhot coals, like the Comanches did some of their victims after tanking up on Cugat's rotgut whiskey.

Jud held the bay mare with a firm rein as she tried to increase her trot to a gallop with the unconscious tension of his legs. He eased her off to the right a little, toward the leveling out of the several washes that were deeper on his left but convering to the right in a thirty-yard-wide flat with brushes and hummocks of soil and drifts.

Jud cut his eyes to the left, toward the bank of woods yonder, hoping to see again the movement that had warned him of Cugat's presence ahead. But he saw nothing now, as he squinted his eyes against the western sun. He wiped his sweaty palm against the wool leg of his pants then harder as the wool refused to take up the dampness. He was going to get Mrs. Holder if he had to fight every blame whiskey peddler in Texas.

He hitched the belt around a little that supported the Navy Colt, then on second thought, removed the double-barreled shotgun from where it hung by the buckskin loop from the saddlehorn. He slipped caps on the nipples and laid the gun gingerly across his saddlebow.

They forgot that the dead dog would bring buzzards, Jud thought with growing uneasiness, they'd been in a sweat to get back to town and safety before the Comanches started raiding, full of whiskey...

Jud cursed through his teeth and let the rein out a little and the mare leaped into a fast lope. The movement saved Jud Franklin's life.

Even as the mare jumped, the rifle report came bluntly after the vicious sound of the bullet. Jud hit the mare with his heels, and laid forward as two more rifles joined the first in a burst of sound. Bullets smacked meatily into the mare and instinctively Jud freed his feet and as the mare went forward in a loose fall, he leaped, hitting the ground on his feet, plunging forward with the momentum to lose his balance. He fell in the softer dirt of the first wash, desperately cushioning the shotgun with his elbows. The caps didn't explode, and Jud lunged on to a deeper wash and into the protection of its clay banks.

With him under cover, there was silence, and Jud's glance whipped around quickly, seeking a way out of this. He went snaking down the ditch toward the timber of the branch. The banks flattened out but there were enough of the drifts and weeds and small scrubby bushes to offer him cover all the way to the branch. After that he would be in this semi-prairie, afoot while three men hunted him on horseback. He wouldn't have a chance.

JUD STOPPED. He had to go on to get help for Lettie—yet if he

BLOOD ON THE MOON

by W. J. REYNOLDS

IT WAS FUNNY, ONE MINUTE STARK FEAR HAD JUD TREMBLING LIKE A LEAF, THE NEXT MINUTE HE WAS A GIANT OF TERRIBLE STRENGTH AND FURY . . . .
★ ★ DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH THRILLER ★ ★

Jud fired and saw one savage hurled from the saddle.

tried that now, he would die. There was only one thing to do: stay and fight until dark, if he could last that long, then slip away.

Jud wriggled on again to the cover of a drift of branches and old grass, lodged against a small waist-high scrub blackjack. He sleeved the sweat from his eyes and inspected the caps on the shotgun, then drew the Colt and made sure the five caps there were in place. He laid the Colt near his hand, slid the shotgun through the edge of the drift, his chin resting on the breech. All he could do was wait for their next move.

Cugat couldn't wait too long. He would have to get Jud Franklin and clear out. To be connected even remotely with this or whiskey peddling would get Cugat chopped to bits, by relatives of those who had died under the Comanches' hatchets...

Cugat would come all right, and before long, Jud thought with what patience he could. He pulled back the hammers of the shotgun to prevent the telltale clicks later, and lay there sweating, burning with urgency but waiting quietly.

Several shots came from the higher position of the renegades, but none of the bullets came dangerously close. Then the rifles made a steady search of it, and to the listening Jud, the shots came from the same spot.

Two of them's coming around in *the timber to flank me,* he thought, *they'll come bellying up from the branch.*

He ignored the rifleman up there and gave all his attention toward the branch, straining his ears for the sound of their coming.

His first warning was the whisper of cloth or leather in the grainy settlings of the wash and Jud Franklin eased his cheek against the stock of the shotgun, his eyes flaring. Maybe one of them would be the big-gutted Cugat...

He moved just a little to bring the area where the sound had come from, under the muzzles of the gun.

A hand holding a gun snaked into sight from behind a drift thirty feet away. A dirt-greasy sleeve followed, then the bearded face and the flaring, muddy eyes, with tobacco-stained teeth showing in the open mouth. Yewings. A man who haunted the gaming tables and saloons. His body heaved silently into view and on his heels came a second man, a man with a sawed-off face and a slit of a mouth. Bud Busch.

Jud concentrated on Yewings, the more dangerous of the two. Busch wasn't noted for courage and even now Jud saw his scared glances, the continual puckering of his gash mouth.

"Yewings," Busch breathed jerkily. "I don't like this."

Yewings looked back with a silent, savage snarl, and Busch shrank backward, looking more scared of Yewings than of the unknown stalker.

Jud Franklin's eyes glared down the barrel of his gun. This was no time for heroics. He was fighting for his life—and those of his wife and baby. Yewings' face steadied in the groove between the barrels. "Yewings," Jud said, and fired.

With the word, Yewings heaved convulsively and his pistol slanted the short arc at Jud and its blast was drowned in the shotgun's thunder. Yewings' face vanished.

Bud Busch let out a screech and swapped ends and Jud's second barrel bellowed into the drift that concealed the scrambling Busch. Jud dropped the shotgun and snatched up the pistol. He lifted himself a little to get a look at the racing Bud and the bullets coming in a burst of fire from the upper timber ruined his aim and set him back flat again. He heard Bud crashing into the timber of the branch.

Jud reloaded the shotgun then the pistol, then he lay listening, feeling the furious urgency to be on his way yet knowing that he could not.

AFTER AWHILE, he heard the shrill tones of Busch that were quickly silenced. Jud started snaking down the wash for the branch. He couldn't wait, he'd have to force this fight get it over. When they knew he was coming it would take a lot of

guts to wait him out, with that shotgun loaded with buckshot.

He barely gained the timber of the branch when he heard the faint sound of horses, and a few moments of listening told him that they were moving away. He went at a trot, circling the scene of the ambush. He had to be sure.

The sounds faded to nothing and later when Jud climbed a tall elm, he saw the big-bellied form of Cugat, mounted and leading a second horse, and Busch flanking him crossing a bare knoll a mile away. Even as he watched, they turned into a heavily wooded branch that was a finger of the bigger creek bottom to the south.

They could stay under cover there and still see Jud Franklin if he tried to ride on toward town or the Holders. They weren't through yet, they couldn't afford to be. They'd have to come back and bury Yewings, destroy any evidence that would require explaining later. They'd have to get Jud Franklin too.

Jud cursed in a teeth-gritting fury. He slid down the tree and retrieved his shotgun. Long as there was a chance to shut him up before he could talk, Cugat would not abandon the chase. He had a good thing here as long as there was nothing but vague suspicions against him.

Jud hunkered against the tree trunk, trying to make himself consider his dilemma with reason. He was six miles from home and a like amount from the Holders farm and about eight from town. He was afoot and time was the one thing he didn't have to spare. It was almost a sure thing that the Comanches would be raiding, possibly not here, but they could be. He couldn't risk leaving Lettie alone much longer. It would be midnight before he could get home if he went on, dodging Cugat.

If the Indians were raiding, it would bring the rangers out, volunteers such as Jud himself, who was a member. The sight of a burning home usually brought help fast as men could ride. Especially during full moon.. Jud suddenly came to his feet with decision and went at a long jog trot for home...

The sun was still an hour high when Jud Franklin paused in the rim of timber across the cotton patch from his cabin. There was no sound other than the bawling of Lettie's cow at the barn, and the hungry blat of the calf his usual milking time. Jud moved back into the timber and took the time to circle the ten-acre clearing where the house and barn stood. The hasty but thorough look showed no new tracks or moccasin tracks. He trotted to the cabin then and hailed softly, calling Lettie's name. She answered quickly in a shaky voice, opened the door.

She was in her nightgown, and it clung wetly to her from perspiration. Her dark hair clung in damp ringlets to her head and her brown eyes were very dark. He took her quickly into his arms, holding her gently.

She said, "You didn't get Liz, Jud?"

He shook his head. "No, I run into Cugat and his whiskey peddlers. Had a brush with them. They killed the mare. I couldn't risk leaving you alone, Lettie. After that load of whiskey, the Indians will be out too. I'll try something else."

She stirred uneasily in his arms and looked at him, her eyes a little scared. "There isn't much time, Jud. The pains have been coming closer together. You'll have to help me yourself. We'll make it all right."

"You get back to bed, honey," he said and his voice trembled a little.

She squeezed his arms. "I'm not afraid, Jud, not with you here now."

AS SHE GOT back into bed, he lunged blindly for the kitchen, and it took only a moment for him to rake a half bucketful of coals from the stove then hastily chunk it full of wood again. He went on a run for the barn.

He thought desperately, *what could have happened to Liz Holder? She ought to've been here today, to stay with Lettie just in case...*

Jud barely glanced at the new log barn, not a year old yet, and stuffed with sorghum hay for the cow this winter. That sorghum was full of juice and would make one devil of a smoke...

They could see it all the way to Buckley Cornors. They could see it

a long way into Indian country too. But he had two shotguns and a pistol and he could give a good account of himself to the Indians. Since the settlers had organized into a company of Rangers, the Indians usually went in small parties of six to a dozen. While the Ranger chased one or even two parties, others scalped and looted...

Jud shoved the bucket of coals into the hay and fanned them with his hat. Almost instantly, the dry leaves of the sorghum flared up and then it was licking upward, crawling in smoke-tipped tongues of flame. Jud wheeled away, and let down the rails of the calf pen and chased the calf out where it charged instantly to its mother and started sucking. Jud trotted back to the house.

Lettie was sitting up in bed, her eyes stricken. "Jud, your barn! After all that work building it and filling it with hay! Oh, Jud!"

He ran his hand gently over her damp hair, and she grabbed the hand to press it to her face where he could feel the wetness of her tears upon it.

"Don't you worry, honey. There's plenty more trees to make another one and rich land to grow more sorghum. There's even plenty grass along the branch bottoms to get more winter hay. Not as juicy as sorghum maybe, but plenty good enough. Holder will see the fire, and maybe in town too, we'll have plenty help in a few hours. I expect the doc will even come with the men from town." He grinned at her. "Heck, Lettie, all I'll have to do is just sit right here and and let folks come!"

He hoped desperately that she would believe him. There was a chance that he was right of course, but there was the time between—and the Indians and Cugat.

Jud spent his time trying to minister to Lettie, make the terrific pains more bearable for Lettie with his fussing about the clearing. He watched the sun sink to the rim of timber in the west with misgivings, and the greasy column of smoke from the burned barn petered to a thin, scattered haze.

He was bathing Lettie's face with a wet cloth when gobbling cries brought him to his feet, grabbing the shotgun and leaping for the door.

"Stay in bed, Lettie," he ordered. "Sounds like Indians after somebody!"

He could hear the mutter of a hard-running horse and behind that, the greater volume of more hooves. Then through the thin timber eastward he saw the dark flash of black, then the stuck-out head of the Holder's big animal, midnight mane and tail streaming, amid the flapping skirts of Liz Holder.

She came thundering through the narrow ruts of the road cleared through the timber, and then, behind her, Jud saw the small, stretched-out ponies of the Indians. Five or six Comanches yelling like mad, banishing lance and rifle, hammering their horses after the big black.

They'd just jumped her, Jud thought, coming to see about the smoke and maybe join another party. They couldn't stay in sight of that black for long...

"It's Liz Holder, Lettie!" he yelled. "Indians after her but they can't touch that black."

THE HARD-RUNNING horse left the timber and Liz Holder didn't turn him to follow the road but sent him straight through Jud's pocket-high cotton, leaves and grown bolls flying from those driving legs.

Jud propped the shotgun against the cabin wall and jumped out to meet the big horse as Liz Holder sawed at the reins. Jud leaped for the bits and was lifted bodily before the black came to a rearing halt, eyes rolling.

Liz Holder tumbled down, grabbing a carpetbag from the saddlehorn. "Turn him loose, Jud!" she yelled. "Them blamed Indians'll never catch him the way he's scared of them!" She darted for the cabin door, grey hair stringing behind her.

Jud ripped the bridle from the rearing black and hit him with the reins. He wheeled away and went thundering through another strip of cotton while a pair of the screeching Indians tried to cut him off.

Jud leaped for his shotgun then, noting even as he did so that one Indian almost lost his seat as he turned for the black.

Drunk, Jud thought, *blind savage drunk on Cugat's whiskey...*

He wheeled with the shotgun as four of the Indians charged him. Jud fired and saw one Indian hurled from the saddle, and as the second barrel blasted, another hung loosely to his pony as it wheeled away for the timber.

"Here, Jud!" Liz Holder cried, and he turned to take the second gun she handed him.

As he lifted it, he saw the remaining two Indians racing for the timber, bodies flat on their ponies. Jud fired one barrel, and saw the pony lunge, and the Indian on it fly off to tumble loosely in the cotton.

"Guess them scoundrels won't be back for a spell!" Liz Holder panted behind him. "They jumped out at me a half mile back, nearly scared the liver out of me! Guess they was sneaking up to see if they was any scalps left! What happened to your barn, Jud?"

He told her hurriedly as he reloaded the shotgun, and she moved about doing the things she thought needed doing for Lettie. She made sharp, angry sounds at mention of Cugat, and when Jud was done, she said, "You take the gun, Jud, and keep watch, I'll tend Lettie. You keep your mind on watch, and don't pay no mind to Lettie's hollering. It's natural. Hear me?"

Jed spent the next hour prowling the cotton patch, the timber and branch beyond his burned barn. In the light of the big moon, he could plainly see the cabin, and hear Lettie's occasional pained cry. Her cries ran through Jud in nerve-shattering shocks and he sweated and trembled and cursed by turns. He cursed the Indians, Cugat, and his own stupidity in not taking Lettie to town a week ago, all with equal intensity.

He tried to think about the Indians, weighing the questions of whether they'd risk coming back for their dead, and the possibility of their running into another party and all of them coming back for scalps and revenge. Then there was Cugat and Busch to think of, but Jud barely could bring them to mind for frantic worry over Lettie.

ANOTHER HALF hour went by before Lettie's cries came harder and more frequent and then finally there was a long agonizing silence before Mrs. Holder called to him.

Jud went lunging blindly across the cotton patch to burst into the cabin sweating and trembling, his wild eyes grabbed at Lettie in bed.

"Is she dead?" he yelled. "I'm a blame fool! Lord A'mighty—"

A lusty squall cut him off, mouth open and in the wavering light of the candles, he saw the bundle Lettie held to her. Jud sank weakly down beside the bed.

"You'd think, Lettie," Liz Holder said disgustedly, "that fool men would learn after awhile. But it always near scares them to death when they become a papa! In a week, the way he'll be strutting and bragging, you'll doubt if you had anything to do with it. You'll think he done it all himself!"

It took Lettie a few moments to convince Jud that she was all right and that he was the papa of a fine boy.

Mrs. Holden said finally, "Jud, get your big hulk outside now. Them Indians might come back for their dead and they sure won't be above skinning us alive if they get a chance. Then that renegade, if he followed you, sure heard the Indians gobbling and the firing, and he'll never get a better chance to murder us all and blame it on the Indians!"

Jud left the cabin again, with more caution this time. His mind focused on the situation more clearly now, with his relief over Lettie. If those renegades or the Indians had come in the last two hours, they would have had him half skinned before he knew it.

Jud was almost to the timber through the cotton patch when he heard the sound. Instantly he dropped down in the tall cotton stalk, and his experience evaluated the sound and told him it was the restless stamp of a horse's hoof, barely audible from the distance.

He waited, the shotgun gripped in

his hands, hat removed and eyes barely clearing the top of the cotton stalks, eyes searching, eyes straining at the blackness of the timber.

It was minutes before he caught the faint movement in the shadow of the timber at the edge of the cotton. Finally then he made out the shapes of two men there, and as they moved a little again, his fingers tightened on the shotgun. That big figure was unmistakable, the gut bulging over the belt.

Busch's faint whine reached Jud's ears, "I tell you I heard a young'un. They's more folks here. We better hit for California, Cugat!"

"Shut up" Cugat said. "Franklin's wife is due; that's what he was in a sweat about. If we can kill 'em, we're safe. The Indians'll be blamed. Come on."

A trembling fury engulfed Jud Franklin as the two moved cautiously out into the cotton, bent over.

"Listen!" Busch's voice held a sudden panic. "Listen, Cugat!"

Franklin was listening also, the sound was hardly a sound, only a faint pulsation in the earth, such a sound made by many hooves hammering the baked earth.

"Horses!" Busch squawked. "A dozen of them. It's help coming from town—or more Indians! I'm getting the hell out of here!"

Cugat leaped, and Busch cried out as Cugat's gun bounced off his head. "Damm you! Get the horses. Them men are a long way off yet. Bring the nags around the other side of the cabin. Franklin will come out when he hears them fellers, and I'll fill his gut with lead, then another minute will take care of the women. We'll light out then for town. We'll be clear. Git! And I'll cut your guts out if you don't do like I say!"

BUSCH FLED for the timber, and the sound had become the murmur of hooves now, rising like a distant wind. Cugat started for the cabin, cutting to the left of Jud Franklin.

Jud's rage sent him upward, the hammer coming back on the shotgun. Cugat both saw Jud then and heard the clicks, and he fired, lunging aside. Jud jerked the triggers of the shotgun, not even aware of Cugat's shot other than a flash of flame.

With the thunderous double blast of the gun, a giant hand seemed to slam Cugat to the ground, his body disappearing down into the cotton. A gusty, bubbling cry escaped him, and Jud was lunging toward him, the shotgun swinging by the hot barrel.

Somehow the renegade had struggled to his knees, the moon light showing the great bloody spot of stomach, his gun straining upward, eyes bulging. Jud Franklin was upon him then, the gun swinging in a whizzing arc to crash soddenly and with splintering wood against Cugat's head. The renegade's pistol blasted harmlessly into the cotton, and Cugat tumbled in a convulsive heap in the loose soil.

Jud hit him twice more with the stockless gun before he saw the need for it was over, and then he wheeled, remembering Busch, and pulling his pistol turned for the timber.

Lettie's scream halted him instantly, then Liz Holder's shouts came too, and through the sound of the women, Jud heard the sudden clatter of hoofs, the crashing of brush that faded with the rider's passage. Busch was selling out. Heading west, Indian country. Busch very likely would never make it to California...

Jud turned and ran toward the cabin. "All right, Lettie!" he yelled. "I'm all right. There's help coming from town!" He burst into the cabin to push Lettie back on the bed, their voices mingling in assurances.

Jud didn't see the tears in Liz Holders eyes, nor hear her say, "Jud Franklin you big ox, you're just a limber-head over your wife and baby, but you are tough on renegades and Indians!"

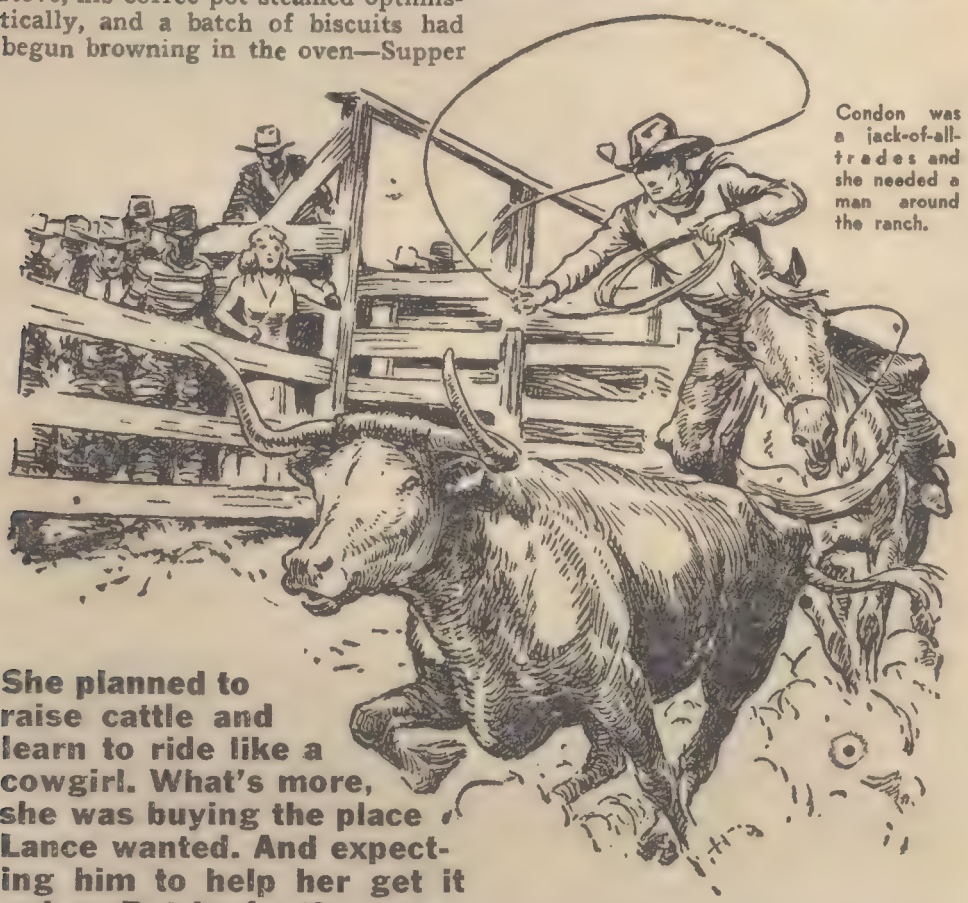
"Shucks, Lettie," Jud was saying, "bunch of men coming from town, you can hear them now, plain. Nothing to worry about atall! Heck, I'll have that barn built back and full of prairie hay 'fore snow!"

Lettie pulled him down into her arms, and holding him and the baby and smiling at Liz, she murmured "I know you will, Jud darling, I know you will..." ●END

THANKS TO THE PARTY LINE

by STEPHEN PAYNE

LANCE CONDON, all five-feet-eleven of his lithe, whipstock body, was feeling great this summer evening. Two rainbow trout were crisping in his skillet atop his stove, his coffee pot steamed optimistically, and a batch of biscuits had begun browning in the oven—Supper



Condon was a jack-of-all-trades and she needed a man around the ranch.

She planned to raise cattle and learn to ride like a cowgirl. What's more, she was buying the place Lance wanted. And expecting him to help her get it going. But by far the worse part was, all of this woman-dodging cowboy's neighbors already knew about it.

for a lone but exuberant cowboy who'd just made final proof on his homestead and had pending two deals which might easily promote him to the enviable status of small cowman.

His wall telephone broke into his pleasant reflections. He stepped briskly to it. "Hello," jovially. "Lance speaking... Who is this? Who?... Blanche Newton!"

He had expected the familiar voice of one of his neighbors on the ten-party line, but this voice was strange —and sweetly feminine enough to give pause to a woman-dodging cowboy.

"What are you saying, Miss Newton?... You have come here with your Aunt Kate and have bought the old D K Ranch? Now wait a minute. You can't... No, no, I didn't mean to be unfriendly! You just—well, sort of surprised me, that's all."

But it wasn't all. In another couple of days Lance had counted on that D K Ranch being his. He had thought the deal with Ed Smithers,

the real estate agent in Pivot, was all set. But now the slippery crook had sold the ranch right out from under him—to a stranger! With some difficulty he managed to keep the angry disappointment out of his voice.

"Yes, ma'am...I reckon I *am* your closest neighbor, but—"

"Let me explain the situation, Mr. Condon." The voice over the wire was musical and pleasant, even to his ear. "Mr. Smithers brought my Aunt Kate and me to the ranch with a load of things we'll need. But he's gone back to Pivot, and I thought maybe you'd come over and—"

"Where's Pete Doakes?" asked Lance. "I thought he was doing the chores around there."

"Doakes milked the cows, then rode off, saying he'd not be back.... We brought two young pigs, but they've managed to get out of their pen. We don't know how to make a fire in a wood stove, and the sink pump doesn't work, so—"

"Whittle shavings," Lance said shortly. "And carry water from the creek."

"I see. But the pigs are lost in the willows and grunting pitifully. Won't you come right away, please?"

"Okay." As Lance started to hang up he heard the line buzzing with Mrs. George Gordon's, "What do you know? Listen to me, George. A 'Blanche Newton' says she's the new owner of the Ditmore place, the D K. She's asked Lance Condon to come and help her... I wonder if she's married?"

"Heck! Didn't you hear her tell me she's got seven kids?" said Lance, and hung up his receiver. Trout and biscuits were burned, but he washed the unpalatable food down with black coffee, and was soon mounted and on his way to the D K, one mile above his own homestead.

He saw candlelight in the house as he tied his horse at the corral, where four milk cows were chewing their cuds, and he heard the unmistakable grunts of the lost pigs.

AT THE HOUSE, a middle-aged woman with a white cloth tied around her head was sweeping out the kitchen, and a girl was lighting one match after another and dropping them into the firebox of the old stove.

"I'm Lance Condon," Lance said, lifting his hat. "You are Miss Newton?"

"Yes. But let's not be formal. I'm Blanche, and you're Lance, and this is my Aunt Kate."

After he'd shaken hands with Aunt Kate, Lance remarked, "You act s'prised, Blanche."

"I supposed a ranchman would be rough-hewn, lined, weatherbeaten—a man with a great mustache, or perhaps a beard. But you're—H'm'm!"

"You're right 'h'm'm' yourself!" Lance said.

Moving to the stove, he lifted the wood out of the firebox, flipped out his knife and whittled a generous supply of shavings. In a matter of moments a fire was roaring.

"Oh, that's the way you do it!" said Aunt Kate. "We're tenderfeet, you see."

"I wouldn't even have guessed it," grinned Lance. "Now what's the matter with the lamps?"

"We found just one, but we can't make it burn." Blanche pointed to a glass lamp in a wall socket, its chimney soot-blackened. Lance took it down and shook it. "Out of oil."

"Oil?" repeated the girl.

"Kerosene. Coal oil," impatiently. He bent to reach a kerosene can near the kitchen door. "While I fill this lamp, you rub some old paper around inside the chimney to clean it."

A few moments later Lance applied a match to the wick and set the chimney in place. "There you are. What's next?"

"Those cute little pigs," said Blanche.

"Oh, yes. Coyotes'll catch 'em if we don't, so I suppose I must make a hog-wrangler of myself."

Blanche had picked up a flashlight. "I'll help you," she said, and they hurried to the willows, Lance calling, "Come, pig, pig, pig!"

But the porkers did not come. Light in hand, Lance prowled through the dense willows, stumbled over roots, scratching his face and tearing his shirt on branches. Three times he came near enough almost to grab a pig, but the hunt continued for at least an hour. Lance's perspiration-soaked shirt clung to his back, and

his feet were sore, when at last he found one pig backed up against a willow stump and flashed the light in its eyes, blinding and confusing it so he could grab its hind leg.

THE GRUNTS of the captured pig attracted his companion, and Blanche was able to catch it. "At last we have them both," she panted. "Now we must fix their pen."

"I never did learn to build pig pens in the dark," said Lance firmly, and solved the problem by putting the pigs into the crate in which they had come.

He was stepping toward his horse when Blanche said, "Oh! That pump! There's no water."

"To hell—to heck with the pump. I'm plenty wet as it is."

"Don't be cross, Lance. After you give us a little pointers, we'll make out all right."

"Sorry," he apologized stiffly.

When the two entered the kitchen, Aunt Kate complained, "I couldn't find any wood to use to keep the fire going, Mr. Condon... Has Blanche told you this ranching venture is her idea? I came along because it isn't safe for her to be all alone."

"But what's the big idea?" Lance demanded.

He reached behind the kitchen door and brought out a lantern, like the lamp, was empty. It too he filled with kerosene while Blanche cleaned the chimney.

"The big idea?" she echoed. "I'm planning to raise cows and learn to ride like a cowgirl."

"Ever been on a horse?" Lance asked ironically. "Come out to the woodpile and hold this lantern while I hack an armload of wood," he ordered.

"But you'll teach me to ride Lance?"—Eyes and voice appealing.

Lance made no reply. He picked up the dull axe and swung it savagely. "Am I being worked!"

The fire was going again, and Aunt Kate busying herself over the stove, when Lance brought two pails of water from the creek, and used the contents of one to prime the pump.

Abruptly the telephone voiced three short peals and a long one. "That's your ring," Lance said to Blanche, who was watching him.

The telephone was in the living-room, but the connecting door was open, and Lance heard, "Yes, Mrs. Gordon, I'm Blanche Newton... Yes, I have bought this ranch. I intend to make it my home... Only myself and my aunt... How exciting! I'll get to meet all my neighbors... Thank you, Mrs. Gordon. Goodbye."

Blanche returned to the kitchen. "News travels fast. Mrs. Gordon had heard about us, Aunt Kate, and wanted to welcome us...There are the oddest sounds on that wire!"

"Never forget this is a party line," Lance commented. He had been rummaging the pantry, and had found several items of food, including bacon, which he was slicing for the women's breakfast.

"'A party line'? What fun," Blanche laughed.

"Fun! A party line's the most aggravating dam— Excuse me, please."

Blanche crinkled her nose saucily. With a challenge in them, her eyes met his. "We've been invited to a ranch dance next Saturday. I'm wondering if you're going."

He was off balance for an instant before he caught himself. "Not me. I'll be riding the calf roundup for Circle Three." He steeped toward the door.

"I thought you were a ranchman," Blanche said.

"Part time only. I took up a homestead and lived on it no more than the law required to make final proof. The rest of the time I've punched cows for Circle Three... Glad to have met you ladies. Good night."

HOME AT eleven, he felt it was too late to phone Alec Potter of Circle Three and ask for his old job, without explaining that the proximity of an unusual young woman was too disturbing to permit his staying at home. Far too disturbing. A fellow couldn't sleep even when he was tuckered out.

He had dozed off when, at five o'clock, the phone awakened him. "Hal—lo-o, Lance spe—akin'," sleepily.

"Oh, Lance." It was Blanche, and Lance silently "Oofed!" "Sorry to

trouble you, but a few minutes ago the calves began bawling. Mr. Smithers said they're skim milk calves—whatever that means—and must be fed out of a bucket. Fed what?"

(What the devil does she think they drink?) "Feed 'em milk," he said. "After you juice the cows—"

"'Juice'? 'Juice'?"

Click! Click! Click! Receivers going down all along the line. Never too early or too late for the rubbernecks, one of whom now scoffed, "For gosh sakes! She don't know what 'juice the cows' means."

"Bill, I reckon you find all this right juicy," Lance growled. "But get off the line...You still there, Blanche?"

"Yes. Funny for us to be interrupted."

"You'll get used to it... Now, first you milk the cows. Then run the milk through the separator and—"

"Milk the cows?... I cut my finger whittling shavings and I'm afraid—"

"Afraid you can't milk?... Did you get a fire started?"

"No shavings, nor fire, and Aunt Kate won't risk using the butcher knife. I've put two buckets of water down the pump; none came up. What must I do to the pump, Lance? What should I feed the pigs? The chickens seem hungry, too...What's a separator, and where is it?"

Lance drew a deep breath, counted to ten, and said, "I'll be along quick as I grab some breakfast."

"Why not have breakfast here? Though there won't be cream or butter until after you've milked."

Again he counted to ten. "There's something I'll have to explain to you about butter. But I'll be there for breakfast."

WHILE HE was dressing, his ring came through again. He glared at the telephone, afraid to answer. But he did, and heard, "Lance? This is Alec Potter."

"Yes, Alec?" Lance was immediately both polite and respectful. Alec Potter of Circle Three was a plumb good scout.

"We're starting to brand calves, and we'll bunch a herd at Beaver Water Hole. Can you give us a hand today?"

"You bet-cha, Alec."

"Good. I'm set to make talk with you about a job as range foreman. Hundred dollars a month to start. Interested?"

"Damn-darned right I am!"

"Well, don't let me down with today's work...G'by."

With his head whirling, Lance put on chaps and spurs for a long day in the saddle. At the D K, however, he made a comprehensive and regretful survey of the ranch. The early morning sun threw silvery glints on the creek winding through willows along the valley. Native wire-grass and blue-stem spread a two-hundred-acre green carpet on either side of the stream, and three hundred-odd acres of excellent pasture bordered the meadow on the north. A sweet little spread.

The former owner, Ditmore, had lost his wife and had then put this property, including dairy cows, horses and equipment, up for sale. Lance had been dickering for it, but now—

"Like what you see?" Blanche interrupted his thoughts, head tipped to give the man on horseback her complete attention. Today she was wearing striped slacks and a gay shirt which set off her slender figure to advantage. Her dark hair was curled beautifully on her well-shaped head, and in spite of his peevishness, Lance's nerves tingled at seeing her in full daylight.

"If you mean your ranch, yes," he said. "It will winter two hundred cattle, and there is summer graze for the same number in those rough hills to the east."

Blanche put a hand on his horse's mane, and her brown eyes looked right into his. "Of course I meant the ranch—and isn't this view breath-taking? What else could I possibly have meant?" She fluttered her eyelashes.

Lance didn't answer. His heart was going as fast as a hummingbird's wings. He fought an impulse to bend down and plant a kiss on those pretty lips—and the fateful moment passed.

Blanche turned away and said, "Still grumpy, Lance?"

He pushed back his hat. Humph. If she knew how I feel, she'd not blame me for being sore. Sore? Burned up. Albert Johnstone of the 2 R offered to stake me to a couple hundred cows, provided I had the feed for 'em. Now that I lost out on getting this D K spread, that deal's off too!

"Grumpy?" he repeated, and managed to grin at the girl. "Ed Smithers is to blame for my sourness. The next time I meet that slippery dingus, ol' Doc Fletcher of Pivot is going to have one devil of a job picking up the pieces and sewing Smithers together again."

Blanche's lips tightened; a slight frown appeared. Then she smiled. "Oh, I catch on. You're kidding a tenderfoot!"

"Let's drop it—and get the chores done," he said, shrugging.

Lance chopped wood, built a fire, got the pump working, and then picked up the milk pails. Blanche accompanied him to the corral, saying, "I must see how you 'juice 'em.' Do you think I can learn to do it?"

"You'll have a chance to find out." He glanced at the white bandage on her left hand. "Using only one hand, at that. I won't be here this evening."

"Meaning you'll let me down?" Blanche lifted one shoulder and gazed straight at him. "Oh, no."

LANCE HUNKERED on a low stool with milk pail between his knees, pulled teats almost fiercely. Later, he found both the calves and the pigs were so hungry that he fed all but a gallon of the fresh milk to them. Just as well, since the separator was filthy; and this reminding him of Pete Doakes, he asked Aunt Kate, "Why'd Doakes leave so abruptly?"

"Blanche told him she didn't want him here," the woman replied, and, showing sudden confusion, she added, "He was such a dirty fellow, we couldn't stand him!"

Offering no comment, Lance turned the cows out to graze, found grain for the chickens and pigs, and then took the separator apart, explaining to curious Blanche how it worked, and how she must scrub and scald each part before putting it together again.

Breakfast was now ready, and Aunt Kate had done fairly well—with the coffee—but had burned the oatmeal, muffins and bacon. "The wood flares up so terribly hot," she defended herself.

For some strange reason Lance wanted to linger over the meal, just listening to Blanche, whose gayety and enthusiasm were something new and novel in his experience. Definitely so.

"We must have screens for doors and windows," said Aunt Kate. "Are you a good carpenter, Mr. Condon?"

Lance gave a start. He'd been dreaming about beautiful big brown eyes, soft black hair, smooth, creamy cheeks and red lips. Lips he'd like to kiss!

"Don't count on me," he said to Aunt Kate, and to Blanche, "Considering the work—man's work—to be done, wouldn't you like to sell this place?"

"Sell it?" in shocked disbelief. "I'm so in love with it I wouldn't sell for three times what I paid."

"Humph! In that case, I'll make a phone call."

He gave the crank of the wall phone three equal turns and put the receiver to his ear. Hearing clicks along the line, he called, "I'm ringing Albert Johnstone at the 2 R... That you, Mr. Johnstone?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

More clicking of receivers taken off the hooks. Lance swore under his breath, and said, "Lance Condon speaking. About that deal—"

"Louder, Gordon. Speak up!"

"Not Gordon. Condon. Lance Condon," shouted Lance. "Remember you said you'd stake me to cows?... Well, I hate—"

"Dag-nab this line! Can't hear you, Gordon."

Lance yelled, "Smithers crossed me up on getting the—"

"Smithers? My mistake. Hang up, Smithers. I wouldn't make any deal with you. Get gypped for sure."

Red-faced and sweating, Lance howled, "You there, Mr. Johnstone?"

No reply. He hung up and turned to see Blanche gazing at him as if deeply concerned. "You couldn't talk

to Mr. Johnstone at the 2 R ranch?"

"No! Too many rubbernecks. I'll have to ride ten miles to tell him the cattle deal's off. A good deal, too. He'd have sold me two hundred cows and taken my note for the full amount at only five percent interest."

"Oh," said Blanche. "Listen! That's our ring!"

LANCE SNATCHED the receiver. "Hello? This is the D K Ranch ...How'r' you, Mrs. Maxwell?... You think you can relay my message to Johnstone?...Thanks. I want to tell— What is it, Blache?"

Close to his ear, Blanche's soft lips were whispering, "You don't want everybody to know your private business. Why not say you'll see Mr. Johnstone later?"

A musculine voice came over the wire. "I'll help you too, Lance. What you want to tell old man Johnstone?"

"You get off the line, Jerry Fraser," snapped Mrs. Maxwell. "I butted in first...Hello, Lance?"

Blanche pushed in front of Lance and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Lance just went out."

"And who are you, dearie? I don't recognize your voice."

Lance hung up the receiver. "You're right, Blanche. I don't want all the old hens gossiping about my business."

"'Old hens'? Shush!...What will you need to fix the pig pen, Lance?"

"Nails, hammer, saw, boards... No, doggone it! I've got to lope to the Circle Three calf roundup. I may as well tell you, dear greenhorn— Alec Potter's offered me a job at one hundred bucks a month, and I'm going to take it."

"All right, Lance. But those little piggies can't stay cooped up in the crate, and I'm afraid I can't.. "

"Come on. We'll fix the pen."

With Blanche handing him tools and nails, Lance temporarily forgot his problems and his disgruntlement. Forgot the swift flight of time, too as Blanche talked about her school days and youthful activities, and her more recent interest in livestock which had prompted her to attend the National Westen Live Stock Show.

"The cattle and horses fascinated me," she enthused. "I decided that someday I'd raise prize-winning steers. I saved all the money I could earn, yet I hadn't nearly enough to buy a ranch until my grandmother left me a neat inheritance."

"So you had the cash to buy this D K," Lance commented. "How did you like the rodeo part of the Stock Show?"

"It was breathtaking."

Lance mopped the sweat dripping from his face and brow. "Did you see me there?"

Blanche hesitated an instant before saying slowly, "I could hardly be expected to remember any one face among so many contestants. You were there, Lance?"

"Yes. When I failed to make a stake, I decided I'd best stick to cowpunching."

"Meaning you'd rather be just a cowman?"

"A cowman owns cattle. I'm still nothing but a cowpoke."

He drove nails Blanche handed to him, using only her right hand, her left still in its white bandage. At last he lifted the pig crate carefully into the finished pen and knocked loose the cleats, while Blanche talked soothingly to the bewildered little pigs. "Aren't they cute little darlings."

Lance squatted on his spurs, grinning up at the enthusiastic girl. "All little things are cute—calves, colts, kittens, puppies. I s'pose every woman considers babies 'cute little darlings."

"I adore babies! You would too, Lance, if you were a baby's father."

"Not much likelihood of that," confused. "Well, I'll be drifting." He walked toward his horse.

"Before you go," Blanche called, gathering up the tools,"please corral my horses. If you aren't going to teach me to ride I must do the best I can by myself."

LANCE LOPED into the pasture and brought in the horses. Two heavy-bodied mares had saucy colts which Blanche admired greatly. There were also two work teams, several two-and three-year-old unbroken fillies and geldings, and a

flea-bitten, sway-backed white plug with a fiddle head.

Darting into the barn, Blanche reappeared with a saddle, a halter and a bridle. "Which one can I ride?"

"That ancient white plug," Lance said, chuckling. "Old man Ditmore's one and only saddle horse. Spook's its name."

"It's the ugliest beast I've ever seen."

"That's swell, Blanche. By contrast you'll look all the prettier... I'll leave you to saddle him yourself."

"I'd like to go with you, Lance, but I won't be seen riding that sorry nag...I'll ride this trim, beautiful sorrel."

"Hold up, Blanche. If you fall off of Spook, he won't run away or kick you. The sorrel isn't broken."

She looked up mischievously. "Then I shall break him while you are gone...See, he is gentle, after all. I shall name him 'Cotton'."

While she was speaking, Blanche had walked up to the sorrel and had slipped on the halter. Much to Lance's surprise, until he recalled that Ditmore halter-broke his young colts. But this did not mean the sorrel was broken to ride.

He said sharply, "I don't want to measure you for a wooden overcoat! Turn Cotton loose, Blanche."

"Cotton's sweet," said Blanche, watching Lance out of the corner of her eye while she rubbed the sorrel's ears and neck. "I'm sure I can ride him." For an instant it seemed to disturb Lance that the girl was smothering her laughter. "What's a wooden overcoat?"

"A coffin!" Lance snapped. "Now you savvy, promise me not to try to ride Cotton."

"But I want to learn to ride. Now. Today...If you're so sure Cotton will buck me off, prove it by riding him first. If he acts up with you, I'll..."

"You'll stay off him?" Lance smothered a profane word. "Okay, it's a deal." He stripped the saddle from his own mount and entered the corral.

AN HOUR later, Lance was still there. As he had suspected, the "gentle" sorrel began to act up the moment he felt the saddle blanket. Lance was obliged to put a hobble on the animal before he could cinch the saddle in place. When he removed the hobble and mounted, Cotton exploded in all directions at once.

Lance had to sock his spurs into the cinch to stay in the saddle. It wouldn't do to take a spill and get his shirt dirty in front of Blanche, and by sheer grit he rode the horse to a finish.

Blanche rewarded him with an enthusiastic, "You were swell, Lance! Is Cotton broken now so I can ride him?"

"Judas, no!" panted Lance. "But I like to finish what I start. If you'll take care of my horse, I'll ride this ornery cayuse to the Circle Three and give him a workout on tomorrow's roundup."

"Tomorrow's roundup? You mean you won't be back home tonight? Won't be back here?"

"I won't be home or here tonight either one," with hard finality. "You and your aunt need a hired man, but I'm not it. Telephone the liveryman in Pivot and have him send somebody."

"But..." apparently dismayed and deeply troubled.

"No buts," said Lance firmly. "Now please open the gate."

Cotton shot out through the open gate, running like a scared cat. Lance let him run. This was an outlet for the roiliness brought on by that girl. He'd been fiddling around, milking, building a pig pen, and breaking a horse, until mid-afternoon, time he should have been helping Alec Potter. Well, he'd square himself with Potter and still get that good job.

But on a sagebrush flat, ten miles from any ranch, the bronc became sullen. Furiously, and to no avail, Lance tried all known expedients. At last he dismounted and led Cotton toward the Circle Three.

The sun was dipping low to the west, however, and the day's work would be over, the cowboys at home. If they saw Lance Condon hoofing it in, leading his mount, how they'd rib him!

Again Lance mounted, and when he discovered that Cotton would travel back toward the D K, he decided to ride the bronc to his own home-

stead. Tomorrow he'd show the stubborn brute who was boss!

The stars were out when Lance once again was thwarted. Cotton was willing to go only to his old home. By now the horse was tired, so the disgruntle and furious cowboy rode in to the D K s l o w l y, making no sound to attract attention.

A light at the corral interested Lance. He put Cotton in the stable and investigated. By lantern-light, Blanche was milking a cow. Twin streams of milk were singing a song as they shot into the pail. She was using both hands!

Lance's nerves tightened; his muscles tightened. Keeping out of sight, he watched the girl carry two brimming pails to the house, where, with swift efficiency, she put the separator together, strained the milk into its great bowl, and began turning the crank.

Aunt Kate called, "The wood burns up so fast I've let the fire go out again. Can you build a new fire?"

"It's very simple, Auntie. Phooey on Lance and his shavings! Put some twisted pieces of paper in the firebox, throw chips from the woodpile on top, and touch a match to it."

THE SEPARATOR was singing now, milk and cream running from its two spouts. The watching man's thoughts were racing savagely! I should have caught on when I found out that she fired Pete Doakes! Now I'll grab her and shake her. Maybe I'll turn her over my knee!

The telephone pealed out the D K ring. Blanche ran to answer, and Lance stepped closer to an open window.

"Hello?...This is Blanche Newton...Oh, Mr. Alec Potter....Why did I call Mrs. Potter today to ask her to tell you to hold off on appointing Lance Condon as your range foreman?... Mr. Potter, I'd rather not try to explain over the party line... How's that?" Blanche's voice sharpened. "Lance hasn't shown up all day?"

Anxious concern filled the girl's voice. "I'm scared, Mr. Potter. Lance was riding a green bronc when he started for your ranch...I needn't worry? That fellow can ride anything that wears hair?... How's that again, please?... Tell Lance if he wants that job to get a wiggle on himself or you'll give it to Price Wycoff?... Lance doesn't want the job... No, he doesn't! G'bye."

Lance had gone rigid. He couldn't even announce his presence.

Blanche rushed back into the kitchen. A fire was now blazing in the stove, and Aunt Kate was setting the table. "Auntie!" Her voice held fright. "Lance didn't reach the Circle Three, and I'm scared!... I'll saddle his horse and go look for him."

Grimly, Lance thought, I'll let her do just that! I want her to stay out all night, riding around on the flats and getting herself lost!

But before the cowboy could duck out of sight, Blanche darted outside so quickly that she caught him.

"Why—why—you're here, Lance!"

"Yes, I'm here." His hands vised the girl's shoulders. "So you—you little fake! A greenhorn who cut her hand whittling shavings and couldn't drive a nail or milk a cow or make a wood fire!"

"Please, Lance, don't be rough and cross," contritely. "I... Oh, there's the phone again."

"The devil with the blamed phone!" snapped Lance. "You and me are due for a show..."

She pulled away from him, and he followed as far as the kitchen, where he heard, "Mr. Johnstone? You were told to ring the D K and you might get in touch with Lance?"

Lance bounded into the living-room. "Let me talk to Johnstone!" he demanded.

BLANCHE HELD fast to the receiver and with s u r p r i s i n g strenght pushed Lance away with her right hand. "Yes, I'm Blanche Newton, the new owner of the D K... I can give your message to Lance."

Lance heard Johnstone's reply: "Tell that fellow I've got another chance to sell them cows and I can't hold off. Does Lance want 'em, or don't he?"

Lance shouted.

"Give me that phone, Blanche,"

But Blanche was saying very decidedly, "He does want the cows, Mr.

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DEATH OF A COWBOY

by JOHN LUMSDEN

None of it would have happened of course if the O-X boss hadn't gone off looking for a new pass through the mountains. Nor if the girl up at the house had returned Gus Ball's esteem . . . .

Curt took up the rear-guard to hold off the attack.

GUS BALL said to Curt Little, "Come on now, Curt, get the lead out."

Curt was whittling. As usual. Hunkered all down in front of the wooden stoop of the bunkshack, with the blazing hot sun on his back. His thin tan shirt wasn't wet between the shoulder blades. On any other man it would have been.

Gus liked the girl up at the house. Curt didn't. Curt didn't seem to like any girls.

Gus enjoyed a few hands of poker with the boys every so often. Not Curt. Curt never touched the pasteboards.

In other words, Curt Little and Gus Ball didn't agree about anything. Nor, for that matter, did Curt Little

and most of the rest of the O-X crew. The difference was, Gus being the ramrod, he could say things to Curt without their being fighting talk.

Curt Little was the kind of ranny that makes everybody want to take a poke at him. Everybody seemed to be just waiting around for an excuse to do this. And the funny thing about this kind of ranny, about Curt, is that it isn't anything in particular that they do exactly, or say, or anything, it's what they *don't* do that riles everybody. That self-sufficient way they have, as though they don't know you're alive, and care less.

Ordinarily they'd have been taking another herd north and all hands would have found themselves too busy for such insignificant personal matters, but a legendary old guide and trapper who'd never even heard of Curt Little, had changed all this.

Old Ted Tollant had finally decided to make a piece of change for himself instead of forever steering others to their fortunes: he'd discovered a shortcut through the mountains, and spread word of it far and wide, and so all the cattlemen aimed their drives for good-natured old Ted's new pass through to the Blue River watershed.

The pass was there sure enough when they arrived, and so was good-natured old Ted, big grin and all, but so too was the scattergun across the graybeard's knobby knees. Ten cents per head, the oldster wanted, whether steer, man, or wagon, to go through. And to the stunned cattlemen's amazement, old Ted was prepared to make his edict stick: he had secured legislative authority from the State to collect his toll.

The boss of the O-X had been one of the first to run into Ted's roadblock. He'd debated shooting the wily old guide, but in the end paid the four-hundred-odd dollars demanded. Not, though, without vowing never to put another herd through old Ted's tollgate, and swearing he'd find another route west here if it took him the remainder of his life and he never sent another cow north.

That was what had the O-X bottled up now, cattle and tempers both. The base had been off for over two months now on his furious quest. The big crew was getting paid regular and working little, and at first this seemed fine and dandy, but lately it had begun to pall. A man wanted to do a *little* work for his money, what the hell.

So Gus Ball, who'd been left in charge, of course, was feeling his oats. And beginning to shove the men around. So naturally one of the first ones he began roweling was Curt Little.

"What are you, deaf or something?" he nagged Curt. Because Curt hadn't moved a hair. Curt had this job of whittling he was doing.

"Look you damned fool, I ain't asking you, I'm telling you." Gus's lean, sweaty face was bloated a bit, with the edge of rage in him now. "Now get the blazes down the hill and help them with them fenceposts."

Curt gave the half-carved chunk of wood a couple final licks with his snap-blade knife, which he shut and tucked in a hip pocket of his skin-tight blue jeans. He managed not to meet the foreman's eyes, rising. That was one of the characteristics that got under the men's skins, for example. You sometimes wondered how Curt Little kept from bumping into people, he noted their presence so seldom.

Curt was built well, but not extra-muscular nor extra-tall. Even, in other words, his build irritated, made men want to test it, take this cuss apart and see what made him tick. Most men, for cripes' sake, you could look at them and size them, decide that this was one you could take or couldn't take. Curt Little you couldn't size like that.

None of which would have mattered a whit, as has been stated, if the O-X boss hadn't gone off looking for that new pass through the mountains.

Nor if the girl up at the house had returned Gus Ball's esteem. Instead of fastening her favor on Curt Little...

SHE WOULD come down, like this morning, and watch the men work. She was the boss's niece or ward or something, from the East.

Didn't have his name, Catherine Dooley her name was, but she looked kind of like him. Up to a point, of course. Same high cheekbones, and dark curly hair, and dark eyebrows, and flashing eyes. Emerald-green, her eyes were though, his weren't that color, and her structure of course was fragile while his was bull-like.

"Hello," she'd say, and one or two of the boys, never Curt, would tip their hats and murmur, "Ma'am," and she'd stand there with her riding boots set part sort of frowning down at Curt, her bare knees under the pleated skirt not twenty inches away from his face, because she'd always stand boldy like that right next to where he was working.

"Why does it take you so long with these fenceposts?" she said this morning.

A couple of the boys glanced at each other. All of them scrooched around a little. Except Curt. Curt leaned forward narrow-eyed, bunking a post into place with the butt of a palm, as though his task were not only a very serious matter but also a very precise one.

"Settin' posts takes time, ma'am," one of the more amiable hands allowed with a grin.

"Yes'm." another confirmed.

"Iffen yore uncle would git back from his mountaineerin'," an old-timer supplied, "we'd be out on the trail, like we're supposed tuh be. Me, I'm a cowboy, ma'am, I ain't no handyman. Been a cowboy since I was knee-high to a gnat."

This only made Miss Dooley frown the harder at Curt. This was news; when her uncle got back, the crew would not be here thenceforward...

"What is your name?" she said suddenly to Curt.

"Hey, somebody's speakin' to yuh," one of the men nudged him.

"Curt Little, ma'am," he said without so much as glancing up.

And it wasn't an hour later that she found Gus Ball in his "office"—a table in a rear corner of the bunkshack—and he grinned broadly as she came in the open rear door and then wiped the grin clean off when she said, "Will you send Mr. Little up to the h o u s e this afternoon please? I have a chore that needs to be done."

And her skirt whirled high with how fast she turned and went back out of there, before Gus could ask, "Only Curt Little, you want? Wouldn't any other of us do just as well?"— Meaning himself, of course.

The men flipped remarks at Curt's back as he took his stetson and went up the hill after dinner. A couple of them flipped more than words—one tossed an apple core way up in the air, so that it bounced in Curt's path; another snapped a cigarette butt at him, which fell far short of its target.

"Oh my!" one of the crew jeered, and the pent-up irritation in all of them was released at this in a general burst of raucous laughter.

Gus Ball had got up from the dinner table, which, along with the kitchen, was in another building that adjoined the bunkshack, and gone to his "office"...

CATHERINE DOOLEY'S wide, emerald-green, d e v i l i s h eyes played on Curt Little's face boldly, expectantly, as he came into the big dark front room of the rambling ranchhouse on the hill. His own grey eyes touched hers fleetingly and he took off his hat.

"You had something you wanted done, ma'am?" he said at once.

"Yes, I need to be entertained."

Curt managed a brief twist of one corner of his flat-lipped mouth, that was supposed to be a smile at Miss Dooley's joke

"I'm not joking. Do you know why I'm here? My parents, who are very wealthy, consider me a brat, and they thought that if they sent me out to my uncle's ranch in the big, wide-open spaces, it would make a new woman of me. So far it has just plain bored me."

Curt began chewing an inside corner of his lower lip.

"That's too bad, Ma'am," he said. "You had s o m e t h i n g you wanted done—?"

"I don't think I'd be bored though if you went for a ride with me. Would you go for a ride with me, Mr. Little?"

A muscle played back along Curt's

jaw; his cheek was white there, against the tan of the rest of his face, from shaving, which Curt did silently every morning at the cracked mirror over the wash trough behind the bunkhouse. His eyes got a wall-eyed cast, so that he seemed to be looking past both sides of Miss Dooley's head.

"I'll make it easy for you, Mr. Little. I hereby order you to go for a ride with me. You may bring two saddle horses up here in fifteen minutes."

Curt Little didn't move for a full thirty seconds. Not even the wall-eyed look shifted. A kind of paralysis seemed momentarily to take hold of him. Then he put on his stetson and turned to go.

"I can't seem to fasten this belt buckle," Catherine Dooley said suddenly as Curt put his hand on the door knob. "Will you see if you can do it please before you go, Mr. Little."

There was no question in her tone, it was another order rather than a request, and Curt turned back slowly into the room. She came close in front of him, so that when she lowered her head to the problem of the broad, gem-studded leather belt around her waist, her shiny dark curls brushed his face. Then her big, wide, limpid green eyes were directly in front of his face when she looked up again. And her full, ripe-red lips.

"You see?" she said softly. "It won't fasten properly."

Curt Little took his hat off again and put it back under one arm and addressed the recalcitrant buckle. He frowned and the corners of his mouth thinned bleak and white. And the perfume of this bold and very pretty girl enveloped him, and he raised his eyes as far as her mouth and kissed her...

GUS BALL saw the lip rouge on Curt when Curt came back down the hill and he slammed his right fist full in Curt's mouth where the red showed.

"Get up," Gus said, though Curt was not entirely down. "Get up and take what's coming to you, you damned sneak. Who the hell do you think you are anyway."

Curt wiped the back of his free hand slowly across his mouth and looked at the blood; he had his left hand back on the ground, where it had gone to prevent his sitting down in a hard bounce.

All the men within earshot or eyeshot dropped what they were doing and came running.

"Oh boy," one of them chortled.

"Get up," Gus Ball said again.

Curt got up. Gus went at him at once, the tip of his tongue appearing between thinned-back lips. Curt swung at Gus but Gus's haymaker clouted Curt at the same time. Gus quickly followed up this staggering blow to the head with a low one to the belly.

This last obviously hurt Curt Little, but he stood toe to toe with Gus Ball for a full two minutes before he lowered his arms and was sick.

"His girl friend ought to see him now!" one of the men guffawed.

"Now get back to work," Gus said, "and you'd better by hell not try any more funny stuff."

Getting "back to work" didn't make much sense, as far as that went, because Gus Ball had just about run out of chores with which to keep the men busy, so Curt Little was whittling the following afternoon right after dinner when Catherine Dooley came down the hill again.

"Hello," She said to Curt.

"Hey, Curt!" Gus Ball yelled at once from the corral. "You takin' the day off or something?"

"Have you been fighting?" Catherine Dooley spoke again to Curt, looking at the line of caked blood slanting away from Curt's puffy lower lip.

"Yes ma'am."

"What about?"

Curt half squinted almost up at Catherine but not quite. He was sitting on the bottom step of the eat-shack stoop; he always whittled down close to the ground like that.

"Jest a little ruckus, ma'am."

Catherine Dooley stood there in her bold way watching Curt Little. Her green eyes probed him restlessly in her turn, she was as irritated at

him as the men usually were. He had said, after kissing her the day before, "I'm right sorry about that, ma'am," and gone immediately. And of course had not brought the saddle horses.

"I ordered you to bring two saddle horses to the house yesterday afternoon."

"Yes Ma'am."

She seemed about to demand why he hadn't brought them but instead she said, "Is whittling all you do in your spare time? I've never seen you do anything else. How are you going to make anything of yourself if all you think about is whittling?"

The backs of Curt's ears reddened.

"Curt, dammit, I ain't going to call you again!" Gus Ball hollered.

"I got to go, ma'am" Curt said, pointing with his knife at Gus in explanation and snapping the blade shut as he rose from the steps. He tried to tuck the block of wood in a breast pocket but it was too long so he looked at it briefly and then threw it away.

"Rub down that sorrel I rode to town this morning," Gus Ball said to Curt at the corral...

THE BOSS breezed in that same evening.

"Found it," he greeted his foreman. Gus leapt up from the poker game in the bunkhouse. The other men rose too.

"A new cut through to the Blue?" Gus grinned.

"A new cut through to the Blue," the boss repeated.

"Jeest!" Gus Ball said.

Several of the men echoed the "jeest"

"How did things go?" the boss asked.

"Okay," Gus said. "Well, then, golly we start moving' again—"

"We'll have a herd on the trail before the week's out... Where's the niece? She wasn't up at the house just now."

Gus frowned, started for the door. "She was around this afternoon. And the coosie took her supper up to her. She ought to be—" Gus whirled to the men. "Where the hell's Curt Little?" he demanded.

"Probably beatin' himself at a game of mum'ly peg in the moonlight," one drawled.

"Or settin' under the cottonwood listenin' to the crickets," another said.

"If he's with Miss Dooley again—" Gus Ball began fiercely.

"One of the boys been botherin' my niece?" the boss said. "Because I wouldn't like that."

"This damfool Curt Little," the ramrod said. "I thought I'd taught him a lesson but he's probably too thick-headed to learn."

"No, I wouldn't like that at all," the boss said again.

"Don't worry, we'll find your niece, boss," Gus Ball said, tugging on his stetson as he went out of the bunkshack. "Let's go, lads..."

Catherine Dooley and the cook rode in a half hour later, in the buckboard. She'd got the coosie to drive her to town so she could find out at the hotel when was the next stage East.

Curt Little they still hadn't found when Miss Dooley showed, so everybody, especially the boss, was worked up into quite a lather in his regard by that time.

"Who the hell does he think he is anyway," the boss had shouted at one point. "What's he been doing, making passes at her or something?"

"Well, all I can say, boss," Gus Ball had said grimly as they beat the brush down along the creek, "is that what he did wasn't good."

Curt Little appeared about ten o'clock. By then the boss was agitated anew at Miss Dooley's announcement that she was leaving, for he assumed that Curt was the cause of this.

"Look, *you*," he greeted Curt, "who the hell do you think you are anyway? Where the hell you been?"

Curt pointed with a thumb back over his shoulder.

"Rode out to the mesa," Curt said in a guarded tone.

"What did you want to do, look at the moonlight on the mountains?"

"Yes sir, that was what I went out there for."

The boss glared. "What are you, fella, loco or somethin'?"

"No sir."

"You know what they used to do to

your kind when I was a kid? They took a bullwhip to them."

Curt Little's frown was one of puzzlement. There was no deep concern in the frown, however, as though Curt were accustomed to unexpected violence in the attitudes of others toward him.

"Yes sir," he said....

THE O-X MOVED out at dawn two days later. The boss saw Miss Dooley off first, but he was so full of finding his new cut through the mountains that he quickly shed his unease over her abrupt departure.

It was why he hadn't done anything about Curt Little certainly too; the back of his mind never forgot that he wanted to put a good-sized herd of tough, old animals on the trail for this maiden drive, and for that he'd need every hand he could get—it was no time to be acting fancy about them.

But if the boss was bubbling with triumphant expectation over the laugh he was going to have on penurious old Ted Tollant, the wily graybeard ex-guide was, in his turn, slapping his knob knees in unrestrained glee. The mountain men grapevine had brought him knowledge of the location of the O-X chief's great "find," and every trapper two years out of his cradle knew that wagon trains had once used this pass, but long since marked it *verboten* on their maps because it skirted a snarling nest of warlike Indians east of the rugged range, and the hole-in-the-wall hideout of a band of renegade whites beyond....

When, however, a week later, shortly before a hot, still noon, Gus Ball pointed to the smoke signal up ahead, rising from an out-jut of the first foothills, the boss simply said, "So we're bumping into some Comanches, or Apaches, or whatever the hell they are. We got guns. The hell with 'em."

The big herd milled suddenly at that moment, and the rumble of their twelve thousand hooves rose in an ominous-sounding crescendo, like the voice of thunderheads on the horizon. This sufficed to quickly and completely prepossess everybody from the ramrod down to Curt Little, and the Indian sign was lost in the billowing dust clouds, and concern over it blasted from the minds of the crew by the need for fast and hard and effective riding on their part to turn the exploding edges of the herd in again.

Nobody, though, two hours later, ignored the first crackle of rifle-fire. And it was no more than a crackle, coming from the ledges above them as the O-X crew aimed the rumbling cattle in a neat wedge at the mountains, and might well have been ignored if one of the men had not suddenly jerked in the saddle and toppled like a ragdoll to the ground.

Sight of this brought the boss up even more sharply than the men.

"Them damn Injuns!" he yelled.

Riding with him, Gus Ball went silent, searching the rimrock. His voice was grim when he said, "We're going to have to let the cows run on their own, and go up and dig those sons out of there, you know it?"

Because if we don't, Gus elaborated, they can follow us like that all the way through the pass.

If the boss was at first impatient with taking time for such thorough measures, another rider plunging lifeless into the dust narrowed his thinking to complete agreement with his foreman.

"Okay, dig 'em out!" he shouted, as though addressing the widely deployed O-X crew instead of just Gus Ball.

THE INDIANS, however, were not amenable to such easy disposition. They chose, quite on the other hand, this same moment to show their full strength. War-painted like crazy, they suddenly blossomed along the whole face of the rock-ribbed slope, looking like gaudy desert flowers against the grey and brown of the ledges. At least two hundred of them.

"You know what we're going to have to do, boss?" Gus Ball abruptly amended his suggestion of an instant before. "We're going to have to ditch the cattle and ride hell-for-leather out of here. We haven't got a chance against that horde."

The boss had involuntarily yanked his six-gun and emptied it point-blank

at the Indians. As far as any effect on the Indians went, this was like spitting into a blizzard. Which settled it for the boss, though reluctance to abandon this first try at his new pass dragged heavily on his decision. "Okay!" he growled. "Let's get the blazes out of here!"...

Despite the distraction of the much more serious matters at stake, Gus Ball noted regardless that Curt Little was among the first to turn their horses away from the herd. "He's a beauty all right," the ramrod gritted, putting rowels to his own mustang's flanks.

No great deal of choice was open to the O-X outfit as they began their retreat—they simply rode as hard as they could back across the valley floor. The Indians, though, having produced ponies, were so quickly in hot pursuit that it came clear that the O-X was never going to get away with whole hides by merely trying to outrun them.

Gus Ball had the idea. Who knows, it might actually have grown out of his sour brooding over Curt Little.

We're never going to run away from 'em!" he shouted at the boss. He jabbed a finger several times at the boulder-strewn slopes they were paralleling. "We got to cut up there, and somebody stay and rear-guard us while the others duck out through them rocks!"

The boss nodded, waved his left arm in signal, and led the crew up the north slope. Gus Ball banged a steel fist on Curt Little's forearm as Curt, pulling up to turn, started to gig his roan after the boss.

"Wait a minute, Curt! Somebody's got to stay back and stop them sinners. How 'bout you?"

Before Curt could answer, the foreman was yanking his own Winchester from its saddle scabbard and shoving it at Curt.

"Fort up behind one of them boulders and pick 'em off as they head up here!" Gus Ball went on. He tossed his cartridge belt at Curt as he spurred after the rest of the crew.

"Who'd you put back to cover us, that Curt Little fellow?" the boss asked Gus when the ramrod caught up with him. There was that in the boss's tone that indicated he already knew the answer, only wanted a kind of gloating confirmation of it.

"That's right."

A couple of the men asked it too. In the same tone.

"What'd you do, leave Curt to cover us?"

"That's right."

SO THAT when they came back two days later and found Curt Little, with Gus Ball's .30-30 on one side and his own rifle on the other, it was, somehow, with a feeling of guilt. As if Curt had been murdered not by the Indians but by them. Others of their saddlemates had been killed, a herd had been lost, the boss, new pass had been proven useless, but the thoughts of everybody were ironically tangled only with Curt.

And it somehow didn't help when they reminded themselves and each other that *somebody* had to stay behind and cover their flight. It had been proven a wise maneuver, too, because the Indians were sufficiently disrupted by it to allow the rest of the O-X crew to escape.

That, though, was at the same time paradoxically the most disturbing angle. Curt Little had plainly done quite a job. He'd used up all his own and most of Gus Ball's ammunition before an Indian bullet took him. He hadn't run, nor hidden, nor cowered frozen with fear. There was no way of telling how many Indians he'd picked off before he died, for they would not of course have left any of their dead behind, but the fact did remain that Curt had stopped them and so saved everybody's life...

No, nobody had much to say when they found Curt Little. The boss was about the only one who said anything, under pressure of an urgent need to break the intolerable silence, to bring them back to simple reality. He'd picked up Curt's .30-30 and said,

"Jeest, this one jammed up on him. Good thing you left him your gun too, huh, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said, then cleared his throat. ●END

The sheriff's job was to take his man in, dead or alive. But Jim Baxter knew that his oath of office also demanded that he provide the prisoner

SAFE CONDUCT

by ADOLPH BENNAUER

SHERIFF JIM BAXTER didn't like the looks of it. Returning to Hassayampa with his prisoner, he found the tracks of two other riders cutting into the trail he'd made from town the day before. He had a disturbing suspicion as to who those riders might be.

He stole a glance at the handcuffed man jogging along beside him. Toad William's pudgy face was still as sullen as when Baxter picked him up. But there was a sinister gleam in the pig-like eyes that studied those merging hoofprints. Williams, too, seemed to guess their meaning.

All about, the desert lay baking in the noonday heat. The Terrapin Hills, where the sheriff had first come upon the fugitive, were now only a thin blue line to the rear. Ten miles ahead the Sawtooth Range, which they must cross to get back to Hassayampa, showed its snow-capped peaks.

Taking his prisoner in was going to be a hard fight.

During the return trip there had been moments of conversation between the two—a one-sided conversation, mostly. But the sheriff was patient. He tried again. "You didn't pull off that job alone, Williams. You ain't got what it takes. Your pals, Slim Scanlon and Chuck Madden, was in on it too."

His prisoner's face froze.

"About the only thing you did," the sheriff went on, "was to act as lookout. But, of course, you're in as deep as the others. That is," he added, "unless you want to turn state's evidence."

Toad Williams leered. "You're just wastin' your breath, Sheriff. I'll talk when I have to. An' maybe I won't have to."

Maybe he wouldn't at that, Baxter thought. His glance dropped to the strange hoofprints again, followed them until they were lost against the dazzling brightness of the distant snowcaps. Somewhere between here and those snowcaps Slim Scanlon and Chuck Madden, who had evidently seen him pick up Williams, were waiting. It flattered his vanity, but didn't lessen his concern, that the two had not cared to clash with

him on the open desert.

Two nights before, the Stockmen's Bank at Hassayampa, the county seat, had been broken into and a trifle over thirteen thousand, five hundred dollars in greenbacks had been stolen. Three fresh and separate trails had led out of town. Following one of them at random, Baxter had picked up Williams and thirty-five hundred dollars of the loot.

The small take had been his first clue that Toad Williams, a dull-witted hoodlum who trotted at the heels of those really tough characters Slim Scanlon and Chuck Madden, hadn't pulled the job alone. The appearance of the two sets of strange hoofprints was his second clue. On Scanlon's and Madden's persons, he was confident, would be found the remainder of the stolen money.

He had no intention, however, of going after that money. Handicapped with one prisoner already, he could hardly hope to take any more—not men as formidable as Slim Scanlon and Chuck Madden. Nor did he feel any need for doing so. Toad Williams was his ace-in-the-hole, the means by which the other two would eventually be apprehended anyway.

His chief concern for the present was to get Williams safely to the county jail. An hour ago that task would have meant nothing; now it presented quite a problem. For there was no hope of his being able to bypass Scanlon and Madden on his way to Hassayampa. Only one trail led across the Sawtooth Range to the county seat—the one though Pinion Pass.

AS HE DREW nearer to the mountains, the terrain began to change. Level sand and sage gave way to dry washes, rock ridges and mesas, through and over and around which he rode cautiously, his right hand at his hip. But no one challenged him; the two sets of hoofprints continued to follow the trail as before. His growing fear became a conviction. Scanlon and Madden were waiting for him at Pinion Pass. And Pinion Pass was a trap.

The trail rounded a mesa, descended a gravel wash and came to the bank of a river. Not a large stream, Coyote River, but filled to its banks at this season of the year by those melting snowcaps above. Here it passed over level ground, but half a mile to the south it entered Coyote Canyon, a winding slit between high sandstone walls, where it tore its way along in a series of rapids and whirlpools.

The only means of crossing the river at this point was by old Jake Norden's crude ferryboat, which was poled along by hand and kept on its course by a heavy steel cable. Evidently Norden had seen the pair approaching, for he'd already left his shack on the other side and was starting the boat on its way.

While the sheriff waited, his gaze traveled up the side of the mountain and came to rest frowningly upon Pinion Pass. Might be a good idea to hang back till nightfall, he thought. He'd be a sitting duck for Scanlon and Madden in daylight. On the other hand, their ears would enable them to detect his approach just as well in the darkness and they'd be able to see his figure almost as well against the lighter background of the sky.

He stole a glance at Toad Williams and found that he too was gazing up at the pass, a satisfied grin on his fat foolish-looking face. That smile exasperated Baxter. Maybe they were both wrong, he reflected hopefully. Maybe those two sets of hoofprints weren't made by Scanlon and Madden after all.

As soon as the ferryboat touched the bank, he said to Norden, "Two other riders come through here this morning?"

The old ferryman seemed to take in the situation at a glance, but no sign of emotion showed in his gaunt face. "Reckon they did, Sheriff."

"Slim Scanlon and Chuck Madden?"

Norden dropped his eyes and led the horses aboard the boat. "Don't know anybody by them names, Sheriff."

"Well, what'd they look like? One tall and red-headed, the other short and dark?"

The ferryman picked up his pole

and started his boat on its return trip. "Couldn't rightly say, Sheriff. All passengers look alike to me."

Though irritated by his evasiveness, Baxter guessed the reason for it and realized the futility of questioning him further. Norden was afraid of a reprisal. That he knew both Scanlon and Madden by sight, Baxter was certain, and his evasion was proof positive that these were the two riders ahead.

The ferryboat touched the other side and Norden held it against the bank with his pole. The sheriff tossed him half a dollar and disembarked with his prisoner. But he didn't proceed any farther than the bank. More clearly than ever, he realized what a rash act he was attempting. Whether he tried it by day or night, he would never get through Pinion Pass alive.

At the same time, he couldn't stay here indefinitely. No sense waiting on this little used route for other riders to come along whom he might deputize. Nor was there any way for him to request help from Hassayampa. If only there were some other route across the Sawtooth Range, some old Indian trail, some forgotten cattle pass—

His speculations ended abruptly. In his dilemma he had been glancing absently about him. Quite by chance, his gaze fell upon an object tied to a small boulder at the water's edge, a short distance below the ferryboat—an old skiff which Jake Norden evidently used for fishing and other personal business. He caught his breath sharply. A strange tingle ran up and down his spine.

Yes, there was another route to Hassayampa, a route that wasn't as short as the one through Pinion Pass, but one where no gunmen were likely to be waiting—Coyote River. His glance flashed down the length of it to the entrance of Coyote Canyon, where in fancy he could see it flinging itself in a smother of foam across its bed of boulders.

HE MOISTENED his dried lips, could feel his heart-beat quickening. The idea seemed like madness. Not more than three or four men had made the trip through Coyote Canyon and two of these had been on the staff of a scientific magazine, equipped with an unsinkable boat, life preservers and other safety gear. He would have nothing but a frail, fourteen-foot skiff.

He turned his gaze up to Pinion Pass again, comparing the hazards of that route with the one through Coyote Canyon. And realized grimly that there was no comparison. With faith and courage and luck, he stood a chance of winning through the canyon. But no power within or outside himself could bring him through the pass.

Tight-lipped, he turned upon the ferryman. "How much for your old skiff, Norden?"

Norden looked at him wonderingly, shook his head. "It ain't fer sale, Sheriff. Why?"

"I'm commandeering it then," Baxter told him. "We're not returning to Hassayampa through the pass. We're leaving our horses here and taking to the river."

The two men stared at him incredulously, the face of Jake Norden revealing a startled interest, that of Toad Williams open fear. "You ain't serious, Sheriff," Norden said. "You'd be wrecked before you was half way through the canyon. An' you can't swim in water like that."

"I can't swim in any kind o' water," Toad Williams protested. "An' I ain't committin' suicide for nobody. You can count me out."

The sheriff dismounted and strode over to the other's horse. "You're my prisoner, Williams," he said tersely. "My job is to get you to the county jail at Hassayampa, and I aim to do it. Just how I do it won't make any difference, and whether I bring you in dead or alive won't make much difference, either. Remember, I can always shoot you for resisting arrest. Get down out o' that saddle."

Toad Williams got down awkwardly because of his manacled hands, but by no means subdued. Terror seemed to lend him a certain defiance. "Your job is to give me safe conduct to Hassayampa," he charged. "You got no right to risk my life, just 'cause you're afraid for your own

skin. Besides, you got no proof them two hombres ahead of us is Slim an' Chuck."

Safe conduct. The words struck deeper than Williams could have realized. It was an angle that Baxter hadn't considered before. He remembered his oath of office, which obligated him to protect his prisoner at all costs. Certainly he wouldn't be offering Williams much protection by taking him through Coyote Canyon.

Against this, he weighed the menace of Pinion Pass. If he took that route, he'd not only lose his own life but his prisoner as well. What difference, then, whether he lost Williams through the fury of Coyote River or through the inervention of Scanlon and Madden? That there was a difference he knew, but in his mood of the moment he tried to force that knowledge from him.

"I've taken boats through rapids before," he said crisply. "I think I can take this one through Coyote Canyon. Anyway, I'm not asking you to run any risk I won't be running myself. So quit your whining and get over to that skiff."

Maybe it was due to the backward movement of the lawman's hand, maybe to the sting of the taunt itself, but Williams turned after a battle of looks and headed for the boat. Sheriff Jim Baxter went back to his own horse, removed the package of stolen greenbacks from his saddlebag and thrust them inside his shirt. "Put a hobble on these critters," he told the ferryman. "I'll be back for 'em in a couple o' days."

"*If* you make it, Sheriff."

Baxter flashed a last glance up at the pass. "No if's about it. I've got to make it."

He strode over to the boat, where his prisoner stood staring white-faced in the direction of the canyon. "Hold out your wrists," he ordered, and as Williams mechanically obeyed, he unlocked and removed the pair of handcuffs. "I'm freeing you because I may need your help to get us through. But don't make any move unless I tell you to. Just get into the bow of the boat and set there."

A DARING light flashed into Toad William's eyes. For an instant, feeling himself free, he seemed tempted to turn upon his captor. But something in the sheriff's level gaze killed that idea in its inception. He muttered something unintelligible, got clumsily into the skiff. Baxter untied the boat, gave it a shove, and, as soon as it cleared the bank, got in himself and made his way to the stern.

There were a pair of oars in the boat, but he realized the futility of trying to row his craft over the rapids. The only way he would be able to handle it would be by sculling. He found a chock in the stern for this purpose, shipped one of the oars into it, and, standing with his feet braced against a thwart, worked the skiff out into midstream.

He got some idea of the power of the current then. Even here, where the river bed was comparatively level, it carried the frail craft along at dizzying speed. Sweat started out upon the forehead of the prisoner crouched in the bow; his hands clutched the gunwhale with a deathlike grip. Baxter himself began to feel strange flutterings in the pit of his stomach.

And swiftly the entrance to the canyon drew nearer. Even before they reached it they could hear the roar of the rapids between those narrow walls—a roar that brought goose pimples out upon the sheriff's arms. He braced his feet more solidly against the thwart, got a firmer grip on his oar. This was it, he thought.

The boat plunged into the canyon and they passed from blazing sunlight into cool semi-darkness. On either side of them the red sandstone walls rose sheer, so close that Baxter could almost have touched them with an extended oar. The water beneath them was deep and green and menacing in its absolute calmness. The roar of the rapids became louder, ricocheting from wall to wall, though the rapids themselves were still hidden from view by intervening turns.

Safe conduct. Once more the sheriff winced at the meaning of those words. What earthly protection could he give his prisoner in a situa-

tion like this, where he was practically powerless to protect himself? Skilled riverman though he was, he felt his utter helplessness against the power of this current that was bearing him along as a gnat is borne along in a rain gutter. He must have been mad to try this route.

THE CANYON turned sharply and the current flung his light craft toward the opposite wall. He averted disaster with a long sweep of his steering oar and was almost carried overboard before he could recover his balance. And then a startled cry from Toad Williams swept that danger into the background. His glance flashed down the canyon and for a moment his heart stopped beating. The rapids lay directly ahead.

They were like no other rapids he had ever seen. They seemed to stretch as far as the eye could reach, filling the canyon from wall to wall. Here and there the boulders which formed them thrust their ugly black heads above the surface. In the fraction of time that was left him, Baxter tried to plan a course through those jutting rocks. But always ahead he saw a new one that blocked the course he had planned.

Sweat ran down his face in streams. In the bow, his prisoner was moaning with terror, but Sheriff Jim Baxter was too filled with fear himself to pay any heed. It was the first emergency he had ever encountered where he could use no initiative. All willed action was taken from him. He could act only as each passing danger compelled him to act, entirely on the defensive.

A big, black boulder lay directly ahead now, the current driving against it with a force that shot white water three feet high. He missed it by the width of a man's hand and swung his oar just in time to avoid another that grated along the skiff's bottom and deluged both men with the spray that flew above it. And then he was in the heart of the rapids, and boulders and white water all about him.

He ceased to reason, to hope, even to fear. He became a blind, automatic machine, responding mechanically to the swarming natural forces. But he could still sense their effect, feel the lash of driving spray against his face, hear the occasional crash and splinter of wood as a boulder loomed up ahead which he failed to miss. Time passed, but he didn't know whether it was minutes or hours. He was conscious of no fatigue.

And then he was in open water again, so suddenly and unexpectedly that for an interval he kept on swinging his oar. It seemed too miraculous to be true. Though the skiff was damaged and leaking in several places, they were still afloat. And the canyon, though still twisting to right and left, was becoming broader. Already a strip of bank was beginning to appear at the base of the walls. The air was becoming lighter. They were almost through.

A feeling of weakness that was not due to exhaustion swept over Baxter. He wanted to laugh, to cry out boisterously, but knowing the impulse to be incipient hysteria, checked it immediately. Those leaks were bad; the boat needed baling out. He was about to say as much to his prisoner, who still cowered in the bow of the boat, when Toad Williams raised his head suddenly and yelled, "Look out."

But Baxter saw the menace almost at the same instant. Not a hundred feet ahead the canyon made a turn to the right, a turn so sharp that the curent was unable to negotiate it and drove with undiminished speed straight into the opposite bank, where it formed a funnel-shaped whirlpool twenty feet in diameter. In vain Baxter tugged at his oar. Caught in the drip of the current, the skiff headed directly toward the whirlpool, raced once around its perimeter, then turned bottom up and slid down into its center.

Things happened too fast for Baxter to record them. He had a blurred impression of going over with the boat, of being plunged into whirling, ice-cold water, of hearing Toad Williams's strangled cry, of feeling a pair of arms close about his own, of sinking deeper and deeper.

Of all his impressions, that sinking sensation was the most vivid. Not

only was Williams dragging both of them down but the whirlpool was sucking them towards its center, where the undercurrent would seize them and carry them to their death. It was instinct that told Baxter this, for he had no time to reason. And it was instinct that caused him to bring his knee up with all the force he could muster into Toad Williams' rotund abdomen.

THE GRIP about his body relaxed, he felt his prisoner's body go limp. Instantly he reached down, unbuckled his gun-belt and let it drop to the bottom. That brought his head above the surface again. Pulling his unconscious prisoner up with one hand, he worked with both feet and the other hand to fight the suction of the whirlpool.

It was useless. Inexorably he found himself being drawn down to its center. But directly in that center, its buoyancy bucking the pull of the undercurrent, was the overturned skiff and the pair of oars. Hungrily Baxter eyed them, eased his body toward them.

And then chilled with a new terror. For the closer he got the more powerful became the pull of the undercurrent. Nearing the side of the skiff, he was almost afraid to cease paddling and reach for it, lest the current suck him down. But he took that chance, essayed a wild clutch at a jagged breach in the boat's side—and made it.

Temporarily at least, he was safe. Though the boat lost some of its buoyancy, it still remained above the surface. Then trouble beset him from another source, though he was more relieved by it than otherwise. Toad Williams was regaining consciousness. He gave a strangled gasp, opened his eyes, then started clawing frantically at the sheriff's body again.

"Hold it," Baxter told him sharply, 'or you'll drown the both of us. Can't you see the spot we're in?"

Evidently Williams could, but it didn't serve to quiet him. "We'll drown anyway," he wailed hysterically. "We can't hang on like this forever. An' we can't get out o' this whirlpool, either. An' it's all your damned fault. Norden told you you couldn't make it this way. But you wouldn't listen. All you was thinkin' about was your own skin. You didn't care what happened to me. A heck of a sheriff you turned out to be."

Accusation again. Even in the gravity of that moment Jim Baxter felt the sting of it, couldn't deny that it was justified. All that Williams said was true. He'd chosen this route primarily for his own protection, taking a gambler's chance on winning through, only to find himself in a predicament that promised certain death to both. For there seemed no way of escape from this miniature maelstrom and eventually that terrific suction would break up the boat and drag them under.

Despairingly, his glance swept the bank—only fifteen feet away, but it might as well have been fifteen hundred. Narrow, dropping precipitously at the edge of the whirlpool, the bank was lined with boulders of various sizes which wind and weather had torn from the wall above. If only he had some way of reaching out to those boulders, had some anchor by which he might—

A ray of hope brightened his gloom. He remembered that when he first took possession of the skiff up at Jake Norden's ferry it had been tied to just such a boulder. And the rope by which it had been tied was at least twenty feet long. There was no reason why this rope shouldn't still be hanging from the bow of the skiff, and a twenty-foot line was all he needed.

A reactionary weakness swept over him again. But he knew it was the fear of possible disappointment, and resolutely, he fought it off. He must conserve his strength, must act quickly if he were to act at all.

Baxter turned upon his prisoner sharply. "Listen to me, Williams. I think I've got a plan to get us out o' this. Whether it'll work or not I don't know, but I'm sure going to try it. And you've got to help. Think you can drag yourself up on top o' the skiff?"

The hint of hope in the sheriff's eyes was sincere. Panic-stricken

though Williams was, he could not fail to notice this, to seize upon it. "I don't know what you got in mind," he whined, "but it better be good, because—"

"Catch hold of this broken board," Baxter interrupted him. "I've got a grip on your belt. That's it. Now, up."

IT WAS A clumsy operation and the sheriff almost lost his own handhold as a result of it, but after a few minutes of panting and groaning, Toad Williams managed to drag himself up out of the water and lie stretched out across the stern of the overturned boat. Immediately Baxter worked his way forward, found another handhold and pulled himself up over the bow. With one hand he reached beneath the bow and his pulse leaped when his fingers closed upon a dangling rope.

It was impossible to untie the rope in his present position, so he cut it free with his clasp knife. Measuring it with his eye as he coiled it about his arm, he figured that he hadn't sacrificed more than a couple of feet. When the other end came up he made a slip-knot noose in it and lifted it tentatively. The water had increased its weight considerably, which was just what he wanted.

All this time Toad Williams had been watching him in silence, and growing understanding. As the sheriff got to his knees, dangling the noose in his hand, complete comprehension seemed to come to him. "So that's your idee. You're aimin' to lassoo one o' them boulders. But, what then?"

"We'll pull ourselves ashore."

"Pull ourselves across this whirlpool?" Williams was bitterly cynical again. "It'll tear the rope right out of our hands. Or maybe the noose'll slip off before we get ashore. Then we'll be lucky if we ever make it back to this boat again—"

"Then don't try," the sheriff advised him shortly. "And lay still. This boat's bobbing around bad enough as it is."

Baxter had made his share of rope casts in his day, but never from a position as precarious as this. It was worse than trying to work from a bucking bronco. One moment the bow of the boat was up, the next down and the next swinging around to a ninety-degree angle.

He watched his chance and made his throw. The noose fell squarely on top of a boulder, but the pitching motion of the boat pulled it off. He tried again and his noose fell short. He tried a third time, caught another boulder, but again the noose slipped off. He tried the same boulder a second time and the noose settled neatly about its sides—and held.

"All right, Williams." His voice was crisp. "Grab hold of the rope and we'll start hauling ourselves in. We'll get a ducking when we drop off the boat and the whirlpool will try to throw us off our course. But I'll be right behind you, with a turn of the rope around my waist, so you got nothing to worry about. All set?"

Williams looked up at the tautened line. Then he glanced out at the concave area of water that boiled and swirled about them. His Adam's apple was dancing a jig, but his tightened lips showed he was making a real effort to overcome his terror. He drew a deep breath, raised both hands and caught hold of the rope. "All set," he mumbled.

"Let's go."

They struck the water together, plunged beneath the surface, and once more Baxter felt that mighty undercurrent grip his body and try to drag him down. But the resistance of the rope brought him up again, and as soon as his head was out, he started hauling himself in to the bank.

He could gain only a few inches at a time. The force of the revolving water was terrific. It swung the rope forty-five degrees off its course and stretched his body out almost flat upon its surface, blinding and strangling him with its impact. Directly ahead he could see Toad Williams undergoing the same ordeal and wondered how long he could hang on. But terror, it seemed, was serving Williams in lieu of courage. Always, as the sheriff advanced, he found his prisoner the same distance ahead of him. *(Please turn to page 54)*

THE OLD WEST'S STRANGEST INDIAN

by DEAN W. BALLENGER

IN THE SPRING of 1865 the Arapahoes liquidated so many settlers that Governor Evans of the Territory of Colorado realized that he had to do something pretty fast or he wouldn't have anybody to govern.

So he prevailed on the Army and on August 9, 1865, three companies of soldiers led by Major Elias Dodge of the Fort Lyons garrison went into the field. They ambushed the Arapahoes at their summer camp in north-central Colorado, in a moraine in what is now called the South St. Vrain canyon. And what they did to those Arapahoes should have taught the Indians the folly of exterminating settlers.

But it didn't. Instead, one month later, their chief appointed a big buck named Fish-That-Swims-in-the Mountain-Rivers as the tribe's new war captain. His job was to toughen up the young Arapahoes so that they could take on the U. S. Army and, next time, reverse the score.

But the way the captain went at his training program proved that he had more name than brains. His first official act was the establishment of a suicidal system by which each youth of the tribe would prove his qualification to wear a warrior's feather.

Each teen-age boy, the captain announced, would be required to go into the rugged Rockies alone and, armed only with a short-bladed knife, kill a full-grown male bear. That, the captain said, would prove beyond doubt that he was indeed a young man of much guts as well as real capability with a knife.

But a bear is not a creature which can readily be exterminated by a the plan was abandoned three months later for the practical reason that more bears than boys survived those contests.

But Fish-That-Swims-in-the-Mountain-Rivers was an inventive character and dedicated to his task—even if he wasn't very bright and—he promptly came up with another

Yes, the gentle, intelligent Arapahoe who conceived the idea of reservations to stop his people's bloody atrocities, and the brutal killer whose renegade wild bunch terrorized the whole West, were one and the same Indian . . .

scheme which was supposed to harden the tribe's future warriors.

This time each boy was required to snatch a live soldier from the U. S. Army's Thrid Regiment, then encamped at Fort Collins, Colorado.

The Army, naturally, took a dim view of that phase of the Arapahoes' military training program, and went after them with a detachment of 380 men. The battle was short and costly to the Indians.

AFTER THEIR defeat—the second in 6 months—the battered Arapahoes moved 200 miles east and established a village on the Platte River bluffs near the Colorado-Nebraska border.

Then Fish-That-Swims-in-a-Mountain-River, who had proved himself to be a genius at devising ways to reduce the tribe's already decimated population, was inspired by another hairbrained scheme. Enchanted by the appearance of the Union Pacific Railroad which then (spring of 1866) had laid tracks 287 miles west of Omaha, he announced that each future warrior must prove his courage by standing on the tracks in front of an approaching locomotive and staring it to a stop.

But before he had a chance to annihilate any of the tribe's few remaining teen-age boys with that idiotic caper, a crippled but shrewd Arapahoe named Crazylegs Two Horses rode into the village.

Crazylegs lost no time in announcing that the business of proving manhood by ordeal was not only incredibly stupid but was downright expensive in lives. Furthermore he told Wahatoga, the tribe's aged chief, that the latest idea of his war captain was especially ridiculous and that the Arapahoes had better learn to live with the whites instead of tormenting them and then getting daylight beat out of the tribe in retaliation.

But Fish-That-Swims-in-a-Mountain-River pooh-poohed Crazylegs, saying that as quickly as he got the boys trained they'd plaster the white soldiers once and for all.

Then Crazylegs craftily suggested that, if it was such a good idea, the captain himself be the first to stare down a locomotive. Before the big buck had a chance to think of an excuse, Crazylegs reminded the chief that the captain should have nothing to fear since he had assured the tribe's boys that it could easily be done.

It is likely that Fish-That-Swims-in-a-Mountain-River was somewhat less than enthusiastic about demonstrating the latest wrinkle in his training program. But because Crazylegs had maneuvered him into a point of no return, he consented to prove, personally, that a locomotive could be stared to a stop by the baleful glares of a determined Arapahoe.

What happened then is recorded in a letter which engineer Jacob Tabor wrote, now in the archives of the Nebraska Historical Society, "When I first see that Indian astanding on the track I didn't know what on earth was the matter but in a minute I bust out laughin' and I ketched ahold of that throttle and opened her out and we struck that there Indian agoin' 40 miles an hour and he just went to his everlastin'."

The death of Fish-That-Swims-in-the-Mountain-River brought peace to the Arapahoes and proved, somewhat belatedly as far as the tribe was concerned, that Crazylegs was more than a few notches brighter than the average Indian.

In fact he was one of those rare geniuses that pop up occasionally—even among primitive peoples. Crazylegs, because of the outlawry of his later life, never got much recognition for his efforts in behalf of peace—even though he was the man who inspired the federal government with the idea of reservations for Indians, a system which prevails to this day.

BORN IN approximately 1830 Crazylegs was crippled by the "twisting sickness" when he was a small boy—probably polio, which sometimes struck the plains tribes in epidemic proportions.

Unable to participate in the hunting and mock war games of his little friends, Crazylegs took to learning, a feat which came easy to his

nimble brain. He became a favorite with the tribe's elders who taught him the lore and history of their nation. But his quest for knowledge found its greatest outlet when he was in his early teens—after the tribe captured an adventurer named Aaron Finley who became a "white Indian" by marrying an Arapahoe, adopting the tribe's customs, and taking up permanent residence with them.

Finley was a mysterious but soft-spoken and educated little man whom Western historians have tried in vain to establish as a fugitive from some crime in the East or, perhaps, as an early-day soldier of fortune. But whatever the reason that Finley came West the important fact is that he brought with him a substantial education and a half-dozen books.

Crazylegs was fascinated by Finley who taught the boy how to read and write English and to speak it with little accent—considerable accomplishments for an Indian of those times. In addition, he tutored Crazylegs in the history of the white man's world and in elementary law and mathematics.

Crazylegs learned readily. And in later years he astonished more than one white official by his knowledge of history and law and by his fluency with both spoken and written English.

Besides his tremendous capacity for knowledge, Crazylegs was possessed of another asset—sound judgment. So it was inevitable that, when he reached manhood, he came to disagree with the tribe's chief and war captains who, when they were not actually at war with the whites, were always planning a war.

Crazylegs believed that the white man's conquest of the West was but a matter of time and that it would be to his people's advantage to accept that fact and live in peaceful co-existence rather than by promoting endless costly wars.

But Chief Wahatoga and most of his tribesmen were sold on the idea that if they could kill enough whites others would fear to invade their territory. So they increased the tempo of their harassments and massacres in proportion to the influx of white men. Then, with the discovery of gold in Colorado, there were—almost overnight—more white men than the Arapahoes could hope to exterminate.

So they enlisted the aid of the Cheyennes and the Sioux. The harassments of the loosely-allied tribes progressed to atrocities by the spring of 1864.

On April 13, 1864, a herdsman employed by Irvin, Jackman & Co., a firm engaged in hauling freight for the federal government, came into Army headquarters in Denver and reported that the Cheyennes and Arapahoes had stolen 60 work-oxen and 12 head of mules from their winter camp on the Kiowa, 30 miles south of Denver. To enliven their thievery they had tortured 7 employees of the company with fire, ending their sport by scalping them alive.

The district military commander, Col. Chivington, ordered Captain Sanborn—in command of the troops on the Platte—to capture those Indians and bring them into Denver for trial. But the elusive Indians got away, an accomplishment which burned Sanborn, brought the wrath of his superiors onto him, and probably caused him to do what he later did.

"Marvels of the New West," a book published in 1887, says, "From this time on, all spring, summer and autumn, Indians raided the river routes of travel and the outsettlements, robbing and burning houses, attacking trains loaded with merchandise, killing the drivers and those in charge, carrying off what they could and burning the wagons and remaining contents, murdering and mutilating whole families in a manner too shocking to write or speak of, not only those occupying the out-posts but the dwellers occupying the villages."

MEANWHILE Crazylegs Two Horses rode from tribe to tribe attempting to talk the Indians into ending those brutal ravages of life and property. He was so persistent

that he was considered an eccentric by the tribes—even by his own people. And a few tribesmen informed him that if he was so concerned about the whites he should go live with them, a suggestion that more than one Indian regretted having made because Crazylegs, despite his crippled legs and brilliant mind, was not exactly a delicate fellow.

One Sioux who called him a white man learned the hard way that Crazylegs was a mighty nasty little character when he was insulted.

Crazylegs challenged the Sioux to a fight-to-the-finish with knives—a weapon with which he was extraordinarily adept—and when the gutted, dying Sioux lay on the blood-soaked grass, Crazylegs announced to the bystanders that he considered white people the scum of the earth, as any good Indian did, but that the whites outnumbered them and would, eventually, overrun the West. So he urged, on the basis of common sense, that the Indians negotiate a peace before they were exterminated. That sound counsel was met with sneers and curses.

Dismayed but still determined to find a way to end the Indian-white slaughters, Crazylegs decided to see if he could arrange a peace from the white man's side of the trouble. So he went to Denver and obtained an audience with Governor Evans who, after listening to Crazylegs, passed the buck to Colonel Chivington, commander of the Third Regiment which was quartered in Denver.

Chivington must have had no more mental equipment than some of the Indian chiefs, or perhaps, like them, he was itching for a fight, because he said in effect, "The hell with peace palaver, redskin!"

Crazylegs went back to the tribe. He was persistent, though, and utterly sincere about peace. He made and discarded plan after plan, hoping to come up with one that both whites and Indians would go for. Then he conceived the idea of reservations for Indians. So he rode back to Denver and presented that idea—then a radical scheme—to Governor Evans.

The governor laughed in his face. Unabashed, Crazylegs went to see Colonel Chivington. The colonel, whose outstanding trait was his inability to accept innovations, called the idea absurd and in a letter which the Denver Historical Society possesses, he wrote, "I did not propose to let him (Crazylegs) take charge of my duties and dictate how I should conduct my affairs. I did not tolerate his scheme."

But, despite the rejection of the reservation idea, Crazylegs' second visit to Colonel Chivington wasn't in vain; somehow he had learned that the colonel was planning an all-out war on the Sioux-Cheyennes-Arapahoes. And very soon.

So Crazylegs hastened to the Arapahoe nation's principal villiage, then at the mouth of the Big Thompson canyon near the present town of Loveland, Colorado, and he told Chief Wahatoga about the whites' impending big-scale campaign.

For once Wahatoga paid heed to Crazylegs' counsel and he detached his men from the Sioux-Cheyenne alliance on the pretext of carrying out a series of raids far to the south, near the present town of Pueblo, Colorado. And just in time, for two days later, on November 27, the Army went into the field.

THE BATTLE of Sand Creek followed in which the Cheyennes and Sioux—then encamped 21 miles south of the present resort village of Estes Park, Colorado—were ambushed and massacred.

Captain Sanborn, the frustrated soldier who had been outfoxed by the Indians the preceding spring, personally ordered a bloody slaughter of the Indians' women and children, an act for which he was almost court-martialed in subsequent months. Only the fact that Sanborn produced an Indian blanket that was fringed with white women's scalps, ostensibly seized at Sand Creek, saved him from a dishonorable discharge and imprisonment.

The backs of the once-powerful Cheyenne and Sioux nations were broken by the Sand Creek battle.

The Arapahoes were unscathed, but Crazylegs believed that with the example of what happened to the luckless Sioux and Cheyennes, they would end their harassments of whites and settle down.

But "settling down" was complicated by the fact that, actually, the Arapahoes had no place to settle. The plains were rapidly being dotted by farms and the mountains were overrun by gold seekers. So everywhere the Indians went they encountered whites.

Nonetheless Crazylegs was able to talk the Arapahoes out of future shenanigans until he saw the powers in Denver once more; he was determined to try again to talk them into establishing a sanctuary for his people.

But Crazylegs was treated badly in Denver. The success of the Sand Creek battle had made both Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington smug and arrogant. There was only one way to treat the Arapahoes, they told Crazylegs, and that was the way they had treated the Cheyennes and Sioux.

The result of that attitude—which should have surprised no one—was the Arapahoes' reign of terror which ended with their two defeats and the death of their war captain who tried to stare down that Union Pacific locomotive.

By then the tribe had been reduced to a small group of battered but still defiant people. Their hatred of whites was intense and Crazylegs knew that once they regained their strength—perhaps by an alliance with the remnants of the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes— that blood would begin to flow again. And it would end with the virtual extinction of his people.

So he decided to establish a reservation himself—a king-sized project, especially for an impoverished Indian to undertake. Crazylegs intended to do it legally, too—by buying the land which, a few years before, had belonged to his people.

CRAZYLEGS chose a 400-square-mile area which he believed would be ideal for an Indian reservation—the rugged Big Thompson canyon, the huge moraine in which the present village of Estes Park, Colorado, is located, and the towering mountains which now comprise Rocky Mountain National Park. The whole area, at that time, was considered by the whites as useless for agricultural purposes. Futhermore it had already been scoured for gold, and since none had been found it was reasonable to assume that, once the Arapahoes were settled there, they wouldn't be molested.

The forests of the region would provide plenty of elk and deer, the streams were laden with trout, and the various moraines were ideal village sites and suited for the primitive agriculture of the Indians. So Crazylegs' idea, and the locale for it, were basically sound.

To make sure, though, that the whites wouldn't enter the domain, Crazylegs planned to connect the narrow walls of the Big Thompson canyon—the only entrance to the proposed reservation—at the place now known to Rocky Mountain National Park vacationists as the "Palisades," with a high rock embankment which would be manned by the tribe's warriors. Crazylegs said, "We want the whites neither to go through our country nor to reside among us."

The Arapahoes fell for Crazylegs' reservation idea and its location and they agreed to confine themselves within it. Crazylegs assured them that they could live happy, normal lives there without constant costly fights with the white people whom, the Indians finally admitted, had it all over them when it came to warfare.

But there was one big obstacle to Crazylegs' ambitious scheme—it would require money to buy the land. Crazylegs proposed to get that money by outlawry, intending thereby to achieve a good end by a bad means. Finley, his white tutor—then a very old man—urged him to devise some other means, even proposing a trip to Washington. But Crazylegs' enthusiasm got the better of his judgment; besides, he was distrustful of palaver—the Denver deals had soured him on negotiations with the whites.

In subsequent months Crazylegs organized a gang comprised of fugitive criminals, army deserters and fast-buck gents. Though outlawry, especially the leadership of a gang of whites, was an unusual occupation for an Indian, Crazylegs quickly proved that he had what it took.

He led his gang on a varied series of capers. Though he never let them kill, except when cornered or fired upon, he became known as the Ghenghis Khan of the Colorado Territory. In fact, he was the most feared man in the West, probably because he was an Indian—actually he was less brutal than most of the period's white outlaws.

His gang robbed banks, mining camps, smelters, freight offices—any place where they could get their hands on big sums of gold or money. Crazylegs paid his men well, dividing half of the proceeds among them. The other half went into the kitty for the Arapahoes' reservation.

FOR TWO years the gang roamed over Colorado and south-central Wyoming. Life in the gang was tough and rugged. Calvin Routt, one of Crazylegs' men, who later became a respected cattleman in Wyoming, wrote in his memoirs, "I suffered greatly at nights. The mountain cold was intense and the pain from my rock beds was excruciating. But the Indian (Crazylegs) said, "*Think* you are warm, as an Indian does, and you will be warm. And as for the rocks, they will harden your meat."

Routt, who was a literate man, gave posterity its only accurate description of Crazylegs when he wrote, "His face had an intelligent looking expression. In fact, save in dress and complexion, he resembled American rather than Indian nationality. He was short middle sized and his legs were warped so that he walked with seeming anguish though he was never given to complaint. He was bareheaded in all seasons, his black hair banged even with his eyebrows in front and done up in a head knot behind with long locks hanging down on either side."

The gang's robbery of the Blackhawk Mining Company's smelter in the Sangre de Cristo mountains in south-central Colorado was an astonishing operation—and the gang's most profitable.

The men rode into the mining camp and went into the office. Crazylegs calmly announced that they had come to rob the firm of its gold and silver and that bloodshed was at the option of the mining people. Furthermore he wanted enough mules to carry the loot and he expected the miners to load the mules for him.

Having no choice, except sudden death, the officials ordered their men to load the company's mules with ingots of gold and silver. Then Crazylegs took the officials as hostages into the wilds of the rugged Sangre de Cristo and released them unharmed three days later. The smelter manager, Oliver Fossett, later wrote of his experience, "The Indian was pleasant and Christian-gentle but beneath I could perceive savagery. But true to his word he gave us victuals (food) and horses for our return and the whole enterprise was conducted without a single weapon being discharged or one drop of blood being shed."

Sometimes, though, Crazylegs was anything but gentle. After his gang robbed the bank in Greeley on July 7, 1866, they were greeted with gunfire when they attempted to mount their horses. Crazylegs and his crew ran through the streets and hunted down the men who'd shot at him, killing them without mercy. Crazylegs himself, according to Routt's memoirs, killed two of these.

A posse comprised of most of Greeley's male citizens rode out of town a few minutes after the gang departed. But Crazylegs was all-Indian when it came to utilizing natural cover, so he and his men hid in the foothills west of Greeley until the posse passed by, then they went back to Greeley and robbed the freight office, the town's assay office, and a general store.

Crazylegs liked unpredictable capers like that.

He got the Army on his trail, though, after the gang waylaid and robbed a military supply train near

Fort Collins. But Crazylegs led the Army patrols many a merry chase, usually into the foothills of the Rockies where he and his men would hide among the crags and rock formations until the soldiers wore themselves out searching for the men they never found.

DURING his period as a gang leader Crazylegs made frequent trips to the village of his people who were still encamped in the wooded Platte river bluffs on the Colorado-Nebraska border. Each time he took his share of the gang's loot and stashed it away enroute.

On one of those visits to his people—in May, 1867—he learned that a renegade trader by the name of Jules Irwine had gotten the Indians stirred up with the promise of repeating rifles. So once more the tribes were talking of war on the whites. Chief Wahatoga stated his view simply when he told Crazylegs, "White soldiers will die this time."

Crazylegs cursed and said with disgust, "It's no use. More soldiers will come."

"We kill them too," Wahatoga said stubbornly.

"Then still more white soldiers will come. They'll kill every squaw and papoose—as well as every buck in the Arapahoe nation."

Crazylegs cited the Indian's previous military failures and he talked glowingly of the bountiful reservation which would soon be available to them. But Wahatoga was determined to fight again. He must have been a man who was incapable of learning from either experience or observation.

Crazylegs left the camp dejected and low in spirits. But on the way to rejoin his gang he was inspired by an idea—he would find trader Irwine and dispose of him before he supplied the Arapahoes with the new rifles. Thus the war would end before it began.

Crazylegs explained his plan to the men of his gang who, while they cared little whether the Indians and whites fought, were mighty interested in laying hands on those new-style rifles that trader Irwine possessed. Those guns could be sold to any of the region's major trading posts for a pleasant price. In those days there was no such term as "hot merchandise." If a man had goods to sell no one was indiscreet enough to ask how he came into their possession.

So the gang went on the prowl for Jules Irwine. But the trader got word, somehow, of his impending doom and he vanished into the canyons of the northern Colorado Rockies.

The gang hunted him down, though, and when he was captured Crazylegs promptly shot him to death—before he had a chance to reveal the cache of his guns. Routt, in his memoirs, advanced the logical theory that Crazylegs disposed of Irwine in such a hurried manner to preclude any possibility of his guns falling into the hands of the Indians.

Crazylegs had trouble with his gang after that. They felt, quite correctly, that his quick trigger finger had done them out of a substantial profit. In truth, it was a double-cross—the first that Crazylegs had pulled on his own men. One of the gang's members, an army deserter named John Rhodes, became so loud-mouthed about it that Crazylegs decided to silence him. He ordered his men to cut a deck of cards and draw—the low man would be Rhodes' executioner.

Two of the men refused and for the first time in his gang's operation, Crazylegs was confronted by a king-sized disciplinary problem. But he solved it in a forthright manner—he simply shot the two troublemakers. Then he administered the Indian slow-kill to Rhodes which Routt, whose memoirs are in the possession of his grandson in Omaha, described as follows:

"Crazylegs informed me and another man to affix the victim to a needle (pine) tree. Then Crazylegs reverted to the bestial savagery of his ancestors. He shot one of Rhodes' fingers off, then another and another and between each shot he would sit and stare at Rhodes and puff on his pipe. Then he shot his victim in the knees, elbows and shoulders...

"All that time Rhodes screamed,

Rhodes screamed piteously and begged for a quick death, but the Indian was stoic and continued to puff his clay pipe between shots. Finally, tiring of his sport, he ordered us to mount up and we left Rhodes still alive."

Quite understandably, there was no more trouble with the gang after that demonstration of Crazylegs' ruthlessness. In fact, the gang's survivors seemed suddenly to develop a great affection for their leader.

But Crazylegs' days were numbered. In the early fall of 1867, he departed for the Arapahoe village carrying—as usual—his portion of the loot from the gang's latest capers.

Crazylegs never reached the village. Nor did he ever appear with his gang again. Nor did anyone ever see him again. Western historians have advanced innumberable theories about his disappearance but the most generally accepted is that he was ambushed and killed, for the loot he carried, by a member of his own gang.

So Crazylegs' dream of a Rocky Mountain sanctuary for his people never materialized, though 17 years later the Arapahoes were herded onto a barren, windswept reservation established by the federal government (in Montana).

At least 6 men have spent vast sums of money seeking the loot that Crazylegs stashed somewhere between north-central Colorado and the Colorado-Nebraska border. Routt, who spent 3 years looking for it, estimated it at $200,000.

As far as is known, that fortune—mostly in gold and silver ingots, gold coins and gold dust—is still stashed away, perhaps in a cave, or under one of the region's millions of rocks. ●END

THANKS TO THE PARTY LINE

(*cont'd from page 18*)

Johnstone He'll come to see you first thing tomorrow. You'll hold them for him?...Okay. G'bye."

As she hung up the receiver Lance snatched it. "Johnstone!" There was no direct reply, but he heard Mrs. Gordon say, "He was calling through Central from I don't know where, Lance. We can't ring Central, so I don't know how you can..."

Lance hooked the receiver. Blanche was retreating, but he nevertheless caught her. "Have you raised the devil! Telling Alec Potter I'd not want that foreman job, and then telling Johnstone I still want the cows—when I've no place to keep 'em. I'll shake..."

"Lance, you can have a place to keep the cattle." Her head tipped to look straight into his stormy eyes.

"How?" he asked, nonplussed. "What do you mean?"

"I'll show you." She was puckering her lips, and one hand came up around his neck and pulled his head down. As their lips met, the explosive anger and vexation drained out of Lance, and something else, delightful and pleasant, replaced them.

Blanche whispered, "I suppose it's time for me to admit that I saw you at the Stock Show rodeo. I found out all about you that I could—where you lived, what you did. Then when Ed Smithers advertised the D K in a Denver paper, I came here, and..."

"Supper's ready," spoke Aunt Kate from the kitchen. "Come and eat it while it's hot."

"I'm starving," said Lance. "Yet supper can wait until... There's that phone again! Answer it, Aunt Kate. Blanche and I are—busy!"

He held the girl close, and heard her say, "We'll put the two ranches together, Lance darling; live here on the D K. and make our dreams come true!"

Lance had no words. He was kissing her again when he heard Aunt Kate at the telephone: "No, Mrs. Gordon, this isn't Blanche. I'm her aunt...Oh, you do want to talk to me? If Lance has turned down a job with Circle Three and has agreed to buy cattle from Johnstone, you're sure it adds up to—?... That's right it does add up!

"You're afraid a city-raised girl doesn't know what she's letting herself in for... Yes, I 'do tell."

"The angagement can be announced at the dance?...Mrs. Gordon, I hardly think any further announcement will be necessary—thanks to the party line!" ●END

DANTE FALOO

by MARION GEORGE

"You'll all let Dante kill me," Simpson screamed.

THE WORD had gotten around. Mr. Avery, Jim McRoberts and myself, we waited and watched from the window of the Glass Slipper, Jim's saloon. Up and down the street we could see everyone peek out of their doors and windows, look at Simpson's place, then draw back to wait.

I glanced down the street where Simpson's office was. His full name "Martin John Simpson" arched across the window like a rainbow. Below it was lettered "LAWYER".

I remembered the first day I saw him. I had come up from Oklahoma. Being single and footloose I shifted jobs a lot, and finally ended up helping Mr. Avery work his small spread outside of town. I'd ridden in for Mr. Avery's mail that day and stopped at the Slipper on the way out.

Where was he, what did he look like? Nobody knew. All anybody knew was about his gun. A strange kid with a strange name, with that gun . . . .

Simpson had a crowd around him.

Not that they admired the man; they gathered mostly just to hear him blow off steam, and to argue with him.

That morning he was haranguing about how the Texans should come up this way with their cattle drives, that there would be a lot of money for the town if they did.

Of course, the townspeople were against it. They didn't want another Dodge City. But Simpson was determined. When he told them he had already sent a letter to a friend in Texas, the crowd really growled.

I think Simpson liked men to get mad at him. It made him feel important to be hated. He was the only lawyer in this section and was supposed to have a lot of influence upstate. He also was big enough so nobody wanted to start a fight to see how tough he really was.

Back at the ranch Mr. Avery filled me in more.

"He's a thief from way back, Steve," my boss muttered. "We know it, but he's got powerful friends, so no one wants to start anything with him. He's fleeced a dozen small ranchers hereabouts out of their places, and he'll probably own that whole town before he's finished."

A few weeks later I happened to be in a poker game in town. Across from me, Sheriff Tow studied his cards seriously. He was a hard man to play against because his leathery old face never gave any hints. Perhaps the toughness of the dry skin, or that straight back of his, or the narrowed squinty eyes that held all the wisdom of time and trouble, set him apart from the others, but he was a man I admired a lot. I knew he'd seen plenty of action and met many tough types in his time. We all respected Tow and he was a good lawman.

I had been so concerned with my winnings I wasn't too conscious of the conversation. I got in the middle of what was a long standing topic among the oldtimers of this section.

It seems that Simpson had sent a man to prison for a small crime.

"Simpson was plain scared of him," Mr. Avery explained in answer to my question. "Not much more than a boy at the time, but what a lad, a reckless, laughing daredevil. We all liked him." He grinned at the memory. "But he took up gunslinging—you know how kids get. He was pretty good at it too, and liked to scare people with his fancy shooting. Simpson was his favorite target."

SHERIFF TOW threw down three kings and pawed the pot. Mr. Avery leaned back in his chair and cocked his head to one side, his eyes focusing on space.

"Dante Faloo," he muttered, his lips gently forming the name. He looked at me. "Strange name, strange kid."

"You weren't here when all this happened, Steve," Sheriff Tow eyed me. "Must have been three years ago, 'bout a year before you came.

"Simpson never forgave Dante for making a fool of him. Dante used to make him dance with those guns of his. Of course, I had to come to the rescue, much as I hated to."

"Is that why Simpson has it in for everybody," I asked.

Mr. Avery lifted his eyebrows. "Probably. He knew we liked to see Dante devil him and he charged us for it. Guess I don't blame him either."

Tow snorted as he picked up the dealt cards. "If it wasn't Dante he'd find some other excuse to bully us, only in this case Dante wouldn't take it."

"What happened?" I asked. "They shoot it out?"

"Well, not exactly. First off, Dante got married. We thought he'd settle down a bit. He did in a way, too, but Simpson was too much temptation. Dante wasn't one to take his kind of meanness lying down."

The sheriff stopped his telling long enough to carefully judge a bet, then he went on, talking easier sort of. "One day Dante got a little hotheaded and threatened Simpson after the slick tried to squeeze him and Julie out their home. There was a fight and Simpson got shot, not bad but you'd have thought he'd been killed, the way he shouted it all over the county."

The sheriff frowned studying his

discard, then he threw in two cards and leaned back in his chair. "Simpson got his friends and his friends got a marshal. They put Dante in prison for attempted manslaughter."

That was the end of the story. I wanted to ask more questions but thought better of it, everyone was so still. It wasn't till the end of the game that I found Mr. Avery chuckling again.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"If you ever want to bait Simpson tell him Dante's in town. When he left for prison Dante swore in front of everyone that he'd get even with Simpson as soon as he got out. Simpson sends a letter every week to the warden to make sure Dante is still there."

I learned more about Dante Faloo during the next year. His wife lived with her folks at the other end of town. I had never seen her, but gathered she was the prettiest creature God ever made. I soon found out too that the whole town had liked Dante and still did. On the other side of the fence was Simpson, still goading and pressing his demands on everyone.

SO IT WAS with much excitement that I watched Simpson's office this particular day. Mr. Avery and I had ridden into town as soon as we'd heard. Dante Faloo had been pardoned and was already on his way. His threat to Simpson was going to be made good.

"Probably barricaded himself in that office of his," Mr. Avery murmured through his mustache.

"Shaking like a leaf," put in Jim McRoberts from behind the bars. "like a leaf caught in a grand-daddy twister!"

"Where's Dante?" I asked. Both men shrugged their shoulders.

"No one knows," Jim answered. "All I heard was that he and Sheriff Tow had been riding this way since early morning."

"He's probably up on one of the roofs waiting," I said, looking about at the tops of the buildings across the street.

Mr. Avery shook his head. "Not Dante. He'll call a fight, right in the street, middle of it too."

Mr. McRoberts clucked his tongue. "I dunno. Wouldn't work, I bet. Simpson knows Dante's death draw."

"But he could prod Simpson into going for a gun," I said, sure of my hero.

"I just hope he doesn't kill him fast," Mr. Avery growled, surprising me. "I want to see Simpson crawl."

An hour passed and nothing happened. A few of the townspeople had dared to continue their shopping and so in quick steps hurried from one store to the next, casting furtive glances behind them. But no one was leaving town, not this day. It beat a court session, and Mr. Avery declared he'd call it a holiday for him and me.

"I've waited a long time for this, Steve. Simpson has bullied us small ranchers too much. I want to see *him* bullied."

Almost an hour passed by again before a rider appeared coming steadily from the south, Sheriff Tow. He pulled up in front of the saloon, dismounted and tied his horse to the rail. Instead of coming in to the Slipper, however, he walked down the street, crossed to the other side, and knocked at Simpson's door.

It was a few minutes before it opened.

"Must have piled everything he owns against it," Mr. Avery muttered, his face pressed against the Slipper's window.

TEN MINUTES passed before the sheriff showed again and came back to the Slipper.

We caught him off guard with all our questions coming at once. Finally he raised his hands to quiet us.

"I'll tell you what I told Simpson," he said firmly. "Dante is a free man. He can and does carry a gun. My instructions were to escort him to the town limits where I was to set him free, which I did. I don't know where he is now."

We were stymied for a minute.

"Didn't Dante say anything? Didn't he say anything about Simpson?" Mr. McRoberts asked. "What about the grudge?"

Tow nodded his head. "He told me

first thing how he was still planning to get even with Simpson."

A faint hope came back to us.

"Does Simpson know?" I asked.

"He knows,—and is scared," Tow answered, and a slight upward wrinkle appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"So what do we do?" Mr. Avery asked impatiently.

"Wait," Tow answered evenly. "Wait and watch Simpson suffer."

We were eating lunch when Simpson made a surprise visit.

"Sheriff, there must be something you can do," he started out haughtily and stood over us.

"I can eat and that's what I'm doing," Tow answered not looking up from his plate.

"If that's all you can do I can call in the marshal and then see if somebody with more gumption can't be found to take your place," Simpson threatened.

The sheriff merely kept nodding his head, then finally he looked up.

"What reason you got sending for a marshal? 'Cause somebody threatened somebody's life?" Tow waved his hand about the room. "There isn't a man here that hasn't made the same threat. The marshal wouldn't like to ride eighty miles over here just to find out someone made a threat."

"Dante's a killer!" Simpson pounded his fist on the table for emphasis. "A killer!"

"The only thing he's killed so far, is animals," Tow put in quietly.

Simpson almost turned a deep purple. He slowly let out his breath and bent a finger at Tow.

"I'll tear you down, Tow. You have a badge on your vest and you'd better use it. You forget,—I know the law,—I know what your job includes. If anything happens to me, I'll have your skin."

"That goes for each of you. Look at you! Barbarians, come to see the killing! You'd all let Dante kill me, turn your backs."

His eyes grew larger and he waved his arms about. "I've seen your types, —I'm not afraid of you or this town. You live on your little plots of earth content to munch on your vegetables and watch civilization march past you.

"I'VE TRIED my best to make this town big—big as you've never dreamed it possible. You don't have the imagination to plan for the future. You don't know what's good for you. You don't want progress, enlightment. You only want to see me murdered!

"But you won't. No siree, you won't. Dante's a foolish boy. He had a chance to learn a lesson but he's come back, encouraged by all of you, —a hero. You think he's going to kill me. Well! You can tell your friend that I'll be ready for him,—in fact I'll be ready for any of you," and he glared around the group, his anger settling on Sheriff Tow.

Turning his back on us he marched pompously through the doors and back to his office.

"Why that—" one of the men said, rising from his chair.

"Sit down," Tow ordered sharply, picking up his knife to slice his steak. "Simpson has delivered his oration. Give him an hour, then we'll see how he speaks."

He put the cube of meat in his mouth and chewed. After a while I got rid of the stunned feeling and began also to finish my lunch.

After hearing so much about Dante I was anxious to see what he looked like. Everybody agreed on things he did, his characteristics and such things, but when it came to describing him, each one had his own idea.

Slight, the way a mountain lion is in the spring, Sheriff Tow told me. Wears his hat always pushed way back,—shows his curly hair. Has a reckless way about him that goes with his smile, real quick like.

"Tall, nice build," Mr. Avery said when I asked him. "The type you'd see in those catalogues fashioning the new clothes. Loud at times but always smiling. Proud face, never a whisker on his chin. Handsome devil was Dante."

"Wouldn't have given him a second look," McRoberts added, "except for the way he carried himself. Not the handsomest cowpoke around, but the most sought after. Only natural Julie and he would marry."

That's all I ever got, contradictions that might fit any man in town; not a single description that would point him out! So after lunch I went out and began to walk the street, not knowing who to look for, but hoping.

Come to find out everyone else was searching for him too, but not too hard since he and Simpson were playing no parlor game. Sheriff Tow sat himself in a chair on the Slipper's porch and stayed there. After I went and sat next to him. I had a hunch he knew where Dante was.

"He's sure keeping himself hid," I mentioned offhand.

Tow chewed on a cigar, rocking back and forth in the chair, saying not a word,—just looking down at Simpson's office with a sort of glint in his eye.

ABOUT TWO hours before dusk Simpson hurried out of his place and came up to us.

"I've thought it over, Tow. Apparently Dante's playing a game, or he's yellow."

Even from where I was sitting I could smell the whiskey on his breath.

"I've got work to do,—can't expect to wait all day for him to get up nerve to face me." He swaggered a little over that.

Mr. Avery was standing in the doorway. He started to say something but Simpson waved him silent.

"I know he's going to try to kill me. He's fool enough to have held onto that threat all these years. But I'm not going to wait for him to pick a time for his fancy."

We were all silent.

"Thought I'd tell you. I'm not hunting for trouble, I won't be the first to draw. I'm not afraid of him. If he's afraid of me, we'll know pretty soon." He puffed out then, pretty proud.

Simpson nodded his head and walked into the Slipper. We waited till he came out again.

"Where is he?" he asked thickly.

"Perhaps you'd better go home," Tow suggested calmly. "You're in no condition to do anything sensible."

"I never liked you, Tow. You're an elected officer remember, and I've got friends—"

Tow interrupted firmly. "Let your friends help you now, Simpson. You've been threatening this town with your friends and your friends' friends until no one has dared do anything. Well, you're on your own now. No friends to help you 'cause you haven't got any friends. Now maybe we'll all wake up and see what kind of a man you are."

I never guessed Tow had it in him. Neither did Simpson, for he didn't say a thing, just turned and walked off the porch and down the street.

Mr. Avery and McRoberts who were just inside the Slipper's door heard all this. They stood there like they'd lost their wits.

"You talk to him like that?" Mr. Avery stammered.

The sheriff gnawed on his cigar and glared up at my boss.

"'Bout time someone did. I just suddenly got danged tire of being pushed back by a blow-hard that only slings words.

"That's what's wrong with us all. If he'd throw bullets it would be different. That's what we're used to. But when some book-learning gent comes in and throws big words and fancy talk at us, we're buffaloed.

"Well, Dante made me realize what we've been doing. Decided I'd sling some words myself."

"He's a pretty powerful man, Tow," McRoberts said uneasy like.

"So you think, so I thought," the sheriff muttered. "I s'pect we'll see a change by night."

I chuckled. "Dante Faloo."

Again we waited. I wasn't the one for waiting patiently, so I was sure glad I wasn't Simpson. Dante was really torturing the man keeping him guessing all these hours.

A SHOT AND a woman's scream brought the four of us to our feet. Off we dashed, Tow in the lead, toward the sound of some woman's yelling.

Tow pulled his gun as he stepped through a store door, the rest of us found window space. In the middle of the room Simpson was holding a smoking .45 and staring at a small boy being clutched by an hysterical mother.

"He tried to kill my boy," she screamed at the sheriff.

Simpson only shook his head as his own arm fell to his side. "The kid opened the door," he mumbled and he nodded once at the back door. "I didn't see him. I thought it was—"

He didn't finish. Glaring at those around him, he brushed past and went out.

"That fool'll kill us all," Tow said but he didn't follow him. Then most of us started back up the street.

"Why doesn't Dante come and get it over with?" I asked Mr. Avery.

My boss shrugged his shoulders. "He's waited three years for this, Steve. Guess he's entitled to do it the way he wants."

Soon Sheriff Tow slipped out and joined us. Mr. Avery suggested, "Why not have everybody go home till this is over?"

Tow shook his head. "They know how to protect themselves. I want them to see this."

"Are you going to let Dante kill him?" I asked.

Tow scowled at me. "I'm almost three times as old as you. I haven't lived so long by asking silly questions."

"Well, I'm curious," I said, sticking to my guns.

"Then your curiosity will have to wait. What Dante does is his own business 'til he breaks the law."

I thought a moment. I suddenly knew why Dante was waiting. He was getting Simpson desperate enough so he'd draw first, then Dante would shoot in self-defense.

As we entered the Slipper I could tell by McRoberts' face that something was wrong. At the bar Simpson had his back to us. He was emptying a bottle, throwing the liquor down his throat like he was trying to fill a leaky bucket.

Then he smashed the bottle on the counter and swung around to face us.

"You're hiding him from me! I can tell!" He steadied himself as he talked, bracing with both hands along the edge of the bar. "You're waiting for me to be killed but my friends will hear about this. They'll throw you out, Tow, and you too, Avery—I'll see to it you're run out of the state, lose your place." He looked at me but couldn't think of anything I had to lose.

"I'll take you to court for aiding a killer. I'll send you to prison, all of you!" He was shouting now, sort of a scared screeching. I guess he could see what we were thinking, 'cause he started to run out, crying real desperate.

"I'll get him,—I'll get you all,—Dante—Dante Faloo!"

We followed onto the porch and watched as he went swaying down the middle of the street, gun in hand, lurching first one side then the other.

"Dante—Dante Faloo!" His voice cracked, in a crazy way, as he kept repeating the name. Then he sank down onto his knees in the dust, his body hunched over, sobbing.

THAT NIGHT at supper we were all pretty quiet. Dante Faloo had never shown up.

"Where do you suppose he is?" I said.

Sheriff Tow was industriously eating. "On the way to California I reckon," he answered after a bit.

"What?" I asked.

Tow took his time to finish his steak before pushing away the platter and studying Mr. Avery and me.

"He never came to town," he said finally. "On the way here from prison we talked it all over, decided the best thing for him was to go pick up Julie and begin all over again somewhere else."

"But didn't he want to get Simpson?"

Tow shrugged his shoulders. "We talked about him. I told him we'd get even with Simpson ourselves."

He was silent awhile as he looked out the window down toward Simpson's office. "Guess we did at that," he said. "Might have been a little mean. Maybe a bullet would have been kinder but—"

He shrugged his shoulders and reached for his cup of coffee.

"Well I'll be damned," Mr. Avery gasped. "And you planned this all out knowing Dante wasn't ever coming." *(please turn to page 76)*

THE BIG HAND

by WILLIAM VANCE

He felt himself going thru the air on the next spin.

"I guess I'll ride."—As casually as that, Patsy said it. And threw away everything he cared about—the girl, the ranch, the respect of the man who'd raised him . . . ."

PATSY MOONEY stood on the corner of Gold and Silver and looked around. Old red-brick buildings, old gingerbread-fringed houses, and old walrus-mustached Otie Pfluger resting his bony shoulders against Uncle Tom's Saloon. Across the street a yellow dog lay in the warm sunshine. The warm scent of baking bread came from Toot's Bakery across the street.

Overhead, the sky looked like an ocean, and there was enough wind to whip the neckerchief around Patsy's brown throat. And there was a big sign pasted over the usual whiskey ad: *Patsy Mooney*—BIG RODEO—*Patsy Mooney.*

He looked at the sign with quiet gray eyes, not seeing the name, not heeding the small fry parading behind his tall figure. He had a sturdy brown face, flat-planed and strong, with a suggestion of truculence at the corners of his wide mouth.

"Patsy," Otie Pfluger said. "How you been, boy?"

"Fine," Patsy said and he gave all the small fry his small change and said, "Beat it, kids."

Otie took his shoulders away from the wall and shifted his cud to the

other cheek. "You feel fine? You think maybe I could lay a dime or two on you, Patsy?"

"You got a dime or two, put it in Magruder's bank," Patsy said. "Where it'll get you five percent."

"Four," Otie said and put two fingers across his lips and a stream of tobacco juice made a straight line between his pursed lips and the dusty street. He cleared the remains from his chin with the two fingers and said, "It's hard times all over hell."

Patsy crossed the street and walked two blocks to the railroad track. The loading pens were there and the smell was high. He watched while a herd of purebred Herefords were unloaded from stock cars to the loading pens. That was the kind of stuff Dutch needed, he thought. A man had to keep up in this world. Had to keep up or get himself left way behind. Patsy walked along the railroad trackage to Eb Painter's Livery.

Eb, sharp of face and long of body, had his chair tilted back and it came down with a mild thud. He said, "Land sakes, Patsy Mooney."

Patsy leaned a point of his big shoulder against the barn and said, "I thought maybe I'd ride out if you got a good gentle old horse."

Eb slapped his thigh and bent over as his guffaw bounced back from the Parker House walls across the dusty street. "Gosh amight, that's a good one," he chortled, red-faced. He straightened and wiped his eyes with his fingers. "Going out to the old stomping grounds, hey?"

Patsy nodded. There was a strange mixture of eagerness and reluctance inside him at that moment.

Eb hobbled back into the cool dark space of the livery. "You ain't got no kak either, hey?"

Patsy following him, said, "No. Show me where things are and I'll do it myself."

"Saddle, bridle and blanket right in here," Eb said. "And take any o' them out 'cept that black gelding in the last stall."

TEN MINUTES later Patsy rode a chunky roan through the big double doors. "See you later, Eb." he said and put the roan down the road, away from town.

He stopped at the clump of flickering cottonwoods on the creek and lengthened his stirrups again and then mounted and rode on.

His reluctance left him when he rode under the steer skull, nailed to the cross-bar over the gate to Scanlon's place. He saw the gaunt, scrubby cattle, the broken-down fences and it gave him a mournful feeling. The Running S was in worse shape than the last time he'd seen it. The big two-story frame house was the same, only more weathered.

Patsy got down from the roan and said, "Hello, the house!"

A voice answered from within.

"Hello," Patsy said. "Hello, Dutch."

Dutch Scanlon stepped through the door, bareheaded, his thin white hair waving a little in the light breeze.

Patsy stared. He'd last seen Dutch three years before, a big bluff, red-faced man with a hearty voice and self-assurance. Now, the skin dropped sickly from his neck in flabby yellow folds. His face was no longer pudgy but wrinkled. The biggest change was his eyes; they'd lost their fire.

Dutch said, "Go tell somebody they need you."

"Just thought I'd drop by," Patsy said. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough," Dutch said, "Get lost."

"The old place hasn't changed much," Patsy said.

"She's goin' steady," Dutch said. "She goes with a good, easy-goin' feller what knows his navel from a hole in the ground."

"That's a break," Patsy said, and grinned a white-toothed grin to cover up his inside pain as he put a big hand on the porch post.

Dutch stared at him for a moment. "Got some waterin' to do," he grunted and walked past Patsy and down toward the corral.

Patsy saw the watering trough was full. He looked around. An air of desolation hung over everything.

"What's happened?" He wondered out loud.

"Don't you know, Patsy?" a voice asked.

Patsy felt his heart flutter and

then settle down to a hard, steady pounding. He turned slowly. She looked just as she had the last time he'd seen her, here in the front yard of the Running S, a century ago. Brown eyes, creamy white skin, blonde hair and a round chin and a generous mouth—he'd seen that picture in a thousand dreams.

"I guess maybe I forgot."

"Good old Patsy," she said lightly, but with a coolness he didn't miss. "Always forgetting. But you won't forget that the crowd settles down at two p.m. to watch the great Patsy do his stuff. You won't forget that, will you?"

"No," Patsy said around the lump in his throat. "No." There was a slow dull ache in his leg now. He hadn't felt it for a long while, that old leg injury and suddenly it was there again.

She stepped up on the porch with that easy grace still a part of her. She swung around to face him. "You still love it, Patsy? The crowds, the cheers?"

"I guess I love other things," Patsy said, looking meaningly at her.

She ignored that, looking past him, over his head. "You shouldn't have come out here," she said. "You shouldn't, you know."

"Because I wanted to get out and make some real hay," Patsy asked. "Just because of that I shouldn't come in and say howdy?"

"We broke it off," she said. "Three years ago. Let's leave it that way."

DUTCH CAME slowly up from the corral. His walk was stiff and jerky. He said tiredly, "You had dinner yet, Patsy?" To Dutch Scanlon, dinner was the noon meal and so it would remain as long as he lived.

"I don't eat dinner when I'm going to ride," Patsy said. "Just toast and milk."

"We got that left," Dutch said and went on into the house.

"I'll tell him you couldn't stay," she said.

That told him how it was. Here were the two people who meant more to him than anyone in the world. The two people he loved best and he found he couldn't talk to either of them. He said, "I wanted to do what was best—"

"Best for Patsy," she said lightly, but it wouldn't have hurt Patsy half as much if she was rough with him.

"If you'd only listen," he began.

"I've been listening," she said. "For three years. The sound I hear is a cash register clanging, Patsy."

He blindly stepped to the roan and mounted. He sat there for a moment, the reins in his two hands. "The old man said you had a steady," he said in an uneven voice. "Is that the straight goods, Annabel?"

Her voice was remote, her eyes cool. "No," she said. "Not that it makes any difference."

He reached in his pocket and brought out a pair of Annie Oakleys. He leaned over, offering them to her. "Thought you might want to see the show."

She put her two hands behind her back. She said, "We've seen it. Patsy."

He looked into her eyes for a moment. They were cool and unyielding and he stared for a moment longer and then put the roan about and jogged toward the town.

If they'd only listen to him, he thought. If he could only tell them why it had to be this way. But neither Annabel nor Dutch would listen. The moment they saw him, they'd put up that barrier and he couldn't brush it aside. He thought back to the time the Running S was one of the biggest spreads in the state. That'd been a long time ago, when Dutch was vigorous, strong enough to come out ahead, even if he didn't see the changing trends and conform to them.

Of course, that hadn't occupied Patsy's mind much either, in those days. He'd been too busy. Too busy enjoying the things that had always seemed out of reach. Learning to ride and rope. Swimming in the irrigation ditches and hunting ducks in the fall and deer and elk in the winter. All that had happened to him so suddenly he did all those things with more than usual vigor because he half belived it wasn't happening.

Before that it'd been a mean shack on the Pecos River, no food

half the time and Pa half drunk all the time. Then the old man got good and drunk and wandered out on the railroad track and the bunch of men had ridden up to the shack to break the news. And he rode home behind Dutch Scanlon and that was the beginning of a new and good life.

Dutch had treated him like his own. And Dutch had looked with favor on the attraction between the two of them, his own daughter and the orphan kid he'd picked up. Now, both of them figured him for an ingrate. If he could only tell them.

He put the roan into the livery and stripped it down. Outside, he gave Eb Painter the complimentary tickets and went across the street to the Parker House.

Duke Edwards was sitting in the lobby, in a worn leather chair, under a stuffed elk head that had a particularly mournful look. The Duke had been a top rider in his day but a leg injury had put him out of competition. No longer able to cop the money purse, the Duke had become a rodeo clown and a good one. He was a meduim-sized, slender dark man whose likes and dislikes were immediate and keen and tempered his life. He stood up and limped over to meet Patsy.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

Patsy shook his head. "No sale," he said.

"You didn't get into a hassle?"

"We didn't scrap," Patsy said. "But just because I turned tail and dusted. Another two minutes and we'd all been squabbling."

Duke said, "Keep your chin and voice down next time, Patsy."

"I don't believe there'll be a next time," Patsy said steadily.

"You're quitting?" The Duke put the right amount of scorn in his voice.

It didn't move him. "You could call it that," Patsy said.

Duke was silent for a moment. He said, "Why don't you tell 'em the truth, Patsy?"

"It wouldn't come out," Patsy said. "Mostly I guess because I didn't expect 'em to believe what they did—that they had an ingrate in the family."

"What'd you do to make them think differently?" Duke asked.

"I tried," Patsy said. "They wouldn't let me get the first word out."

"You should of backed them both in a corner," Duke said. "And held a club over their heads while you spoke your piece."

"I thought about it," Patsy said.

Yes, he'd thought about it, plenty. He'd even written a half dozen letters that hadn't come out anything like he'd thought they would, and now this finished it.

Duke looked at Patsy and said, "Maybe you'd better not ride, Patsy. Not with your leg the way it is. There's a chance you might draw Two Ticks again."

"Wouldn't the management love that?" Patsy said.

Duke said, "Better not risk finishing out your term like me."

Patsy was silent. The rodeo game hadn't been the gold mine he'd thought at first. Duke was largely responsible for his making what dough he did in these last two years. The first year had been a complete washout. Now, with the main objective gone, there didn't seem to be any point in going on. But even so, something held him there. Something besides the twenty thousand people who wanted to see the hometown boy perform. He said, "I guess I'll ride, Duke."

The Duke sighed and said, "Let's get out there."

IT WAS HOT at the fairgrounds. The sun beat down on more than twenty thousand people. Patsy sat on the top rail of the bucking chute and listened to the Western band on the stand in front of the crowd make a lot of noise. He found himself scanning the faces across the arena from him and he brought himself up short. He knew he was looking for a face that wouldn't be there.

All around him were the old hands, marked by quiet watchfulness. Watchful waiting. He'd known them in Cheyenne, Pendleton, and Calgary. The young ones, loudly talkative to cover their nervousness and their fear that they wouldn't get a draw worthy of their talent. He built

himself a cigarette and when he put it between his lips a match flared and he got it lighted and Duke Edwards waved the match out and broke the stick between his fingers and let it fall.

"Better think again and not ride, Patsy," Duke said.

And even as he spoke a twinge ran from his hip to his toes.

"My leg feels better," Patsy said.

"Mine felt better that day, too," Duke said. "It was a day like this, Patsy. Stands full, sun shining hot. It hasn't shone much since."

"I feel okay," Patsy said.

"Would it make any difference if you drew Two Ticks?" Duke asked.

Patsy shook his head.

Duke sighed. "That's the one you drew," he said and slipped to the ground.

Duke was dressed the part of a clown now, baggy pants, tight coat, broken down boots with enormous spurs and grease paint on his face. His trained jenny charged across the field and the next moment Duke was astride her and the crowd chuckled. Duke's face turned in Patsy's direction for a moment and then he was unreeling his act.

The gate behind Patsy opened and a big black horse, ears back and teeth bared, lunged into the chute and brought up short against the buckout gate. One of the handlers grinned and said, "There's old Two Ticks for you, Patsy. Rarin' to go."

Patsy got down as the handlers climbed the fence to saddle Two Ticks. They'd have a worse job than he for a few minutes, he thought. The black fought every motion as they dropped the blanket and saddle into place.

Two Ticks wasn't an ordinary bucker. No ordinary wild horse. His disposition and temperament, unlike a lot of rodeo horses, made him fight handlers and rider alike. His main point was a homicidal mania. He was termed "dangerous." He'd smashed Duke's leg the last time by ramming a fence, one of his best tricks. And had turned Duke's old injury into a permanent crippling.

The black had gone on to smash Patsy's leg, first show of the season, the year before. Patsy felt a tight knot in his belly, thinking of the fates that had thrown them together again.

The show was starting. Duke was going off the field hanging to the jenny's tail as the announcer drawled, "First bronc riding feature of the day, Ben Kelso, on Tipperary, coming out of gate number one. Ben Kelso, folks, let's give him a big hand."

There was a scattering of applause.

"They're saving the big hand for you, Patsy," Tobe Newman grinned. "You and Two Ticks ought to put on a show today. He's hot as a two-dollar pistol."

Ben Kelso made a solid, if not spectacular ride and there was a flutter of applause as he switched to the pickup's horse without touching the ground. Tipperary was resisting the hazers who crowded him into the fence. The announcer was calling the second ride, Bob Akin on Double Duty, as Patsy went around behind the chute and unbuckled his belt and let his levi's fall around his knees while he adjusted his leg brace.

There was a deepseated throb in his knee and it sent flashes of pain toward his hip and to his toes. He took another notch in the brace and pulled up his pants as the announcer said, "That was a mighty fine ride, folks, by Bob Akin on Double Duty! These boys risk their lives riding these outlaw horses, folks! It just looks easy! Give him a big hand!"

THE WESTERN band struck up a lively tune as Patsy climbed the fence and crouched there above Two Ticks, his chaps flapping in the light, hot wind. The horse flattened his ears and walled his eyes and tried to take the fence out.

"The hometown boy," the announcer brayed. "Patsy Mooney on that double dose of dynamite, Two Ticks! Watch Gate number three, folks. You'll see a ride this afternoon."

Two Ticks rose on his hind legs and pawed at gate number three.

"Get him down," Patsy said.

"We're tryin'," the handlers cursed and hauled.

Patsy dropped into the saddle and the gate went open. He got his boots shoulder-high for the first scratch as

Two Ticks catapulated with a wild squeal into the arena.

Duke was at the chute. He yelled, "Watch him on the fence!"

Patsy heard the cry through the crowd's roar. He had a glimpse of the Duke close to the chute and there was someone with him. A girl and she had her hand on Duke's arm in a tense way. Annabel saw he'd seen her and she waved her other hand. Then Two Ticks whirled away, in a dizzying spin, and Patsy forgot everything except the surging maddened animal between his legs.

Two Ticks wasn't a conventional bucker. The horse, uncannily smart, knew all the usual tricks and a few of his own. Sunfishing across the arena to the fence, Patsy remembered the outlaw's liking for smashing a rider. Close to the fence, Two Ticks switched ends with a lightning-like motion and caromed into the steel barrier. That was how he did it. And Patsy's remembrance saved him, even if he was thinking of Annabel and wondering why she was there at the fairgrounds.

Squealing, Two Ticks came away from the fence and pinwheeled and bucked, head between forelegs and hind hoofs reaching for the sky. There was pure torture in Patsy's leg now, burning torture. He lost a stirrup and on the next spin, with a gone feeling, he went through the air and landed on his shoulders.

He heard the crowd groan and saw the lethal hoofs thrashing the air above him. He rolled clear and the ground shuddered under the impact of slashing iron-shod hoofs. Two Ticks shook his head wildly, foaming, screaming, and came again as the pickup and hazers closed in.

Patsy couldn't stand. He heard the crowd groan again as Two Ticks came in on his hind legs, front hoofs thrashing, squealing his rage and hate...

PATSY AWOKE with the blue sky blotted out by faces that resolved themselves into the doctor who was saying, "Your riding days are over, Patsy."

The other face said, "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, Patsy. Duke told us everything." That was Annabel, her lovely cream-colored face the color of a ripe peach, her lips red and full and quivering.

Dutch had something of the old light in his eyes when he asked, "Why didn't you tell us, boy?" Why didn't you?"

Patsy struggled to get to his feet and Annabel and Duke helped him. He said, "Let's forget it. Forget it all."...

The crowd was behind them, the roar muted in the late afternoon, far away at the fairgrounds. Patsy, leaning on Annabel, led the way, with Duke and Dutch behind. They walked along the railroad trackage to the loading pens. Patsy stood there, feeling the strength and vitality of the girl beside him, her warmth and love flowing out as he watched her face.

He pointed to the herd of blooded Herefords. "That's the kind of stuff we want to get," he said.

"Will you be happy, Patsy, away from the crowd?"

He had his arm around her slender waist. He leaned down and her lips came up to meet his own. After awhile, he finally got it out: "The rodeo was just for one thing: to get the Running S back on its feet."

"I know, Patsy, I know," she whispered huskily.

There was a good feeling inside him as he watched Dutch and Duke point out to each other the good features of the breeder herd, taking care, both of them, to keep their backs turned to Patsy and Annabel. END

GUN-LESS MARSHAL

by S. OMAR BARKER

A BALLAD OF OLD ABILENE

Those times were raw in Abilene,
The Texas trail hands rough!
To keep the peace in Abilene,
Town marshals found it tough!

Some tried it with six-guns aflame,
Some died quiet in their boots,
Till one there came whose fearless fame
Time's verdict still salutes.

Tom Smith was fair of skin and hair,
His height was six feet one;
Of fists he wore a brawny pair,
But at his hip no gun.

The marshal's job was open wide.
Tom said he'd take it on.
"Without no gun," the mayor sighed,
"You won't last through till dawn!

But hell, we've got no marshal here,
So take the dadblamed star!
I reckon I have made it clear
How tough these rannies are!"

Tom pinned the badge on with a grin,
A friendly man and quiet.
"This here's a game I may not win,"
He said, "but let me try it.

First thing, we'll pass the word aroun':
Let cowpokes have their fun,
But while they're paintin' up the town,
They mustn't wear no gun!"

A cowhand fresh in off the trail
Met Tom Smith on the street—
A curly wolf with a knotty tail,
Whose draw was hard to beat.

"I'll check your gun," the marshal said.
"I guess you know the rule."
"You will like hell! Folks turn up dead
Who take me for a fool!"

A mule kicked Tex between the eyes—
Tom's fist struck swift and sure.
The gunman fell and could not rise—
Tom Smith's first "knuckle cure."

(continued on next page)

Wyoming Frank tried out his stuff
By reaching for his gun,
But Tom Smith's fists were quick enough
To lay him out to sun!

Oh, Abilene was rough and raw,
But not too raw to cheer
A man whose bare fists could make law,
Because he knew no fear!

For many a month Tom kept the peace then
In that once bloody town,
Till one who hated all lawmen
Waylaid and shot him down.

The grass grows green in Abilene
Upon a hero's grave—
His mem'ry green in Abilene
Because his heart was brave!

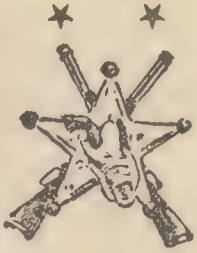
Author's note: The inscription on a bronze tablet over Tom Smith's grave at Abilene, Kansas, reads:

THOMAS J. SMITH

Marshal of Abilene, 1870.

Died a Martyr to Duty, Nov. 2, 1870.

A Fearless Hero of Frontier Days, Who, in Cowboy Chaos, Established the Supremacy of Law.



SAFE CONDUCT

(Cont'd from page 32)

TEN MINUTES of this, minutes that seemed like hours, and it was over. Dazed, exhausted, and half drowned from the water they'd swallowed, the two dragged themselves out of the whirlpool and dropped gratefully upon the solid bank, Williams breathing like a grampus, Baxter only a little less so.

"Well," the sheriff remarked after a long interval, "we walked away from that one."

His prisoner nodded. Like Baxter, he was staring at the whirlpool, but the terror which had marked his face before seemed to have vanished. In its place was an expression of triumph, almost of cockiness. And when he spoke it was not with any of his former antagonism, but with the same air of familiarity the sheriff had displayed.

"Yeah," he said. "That'll sure be somethin' to talk about, won't it. I'll bet Slim an' Chuck never went through anything like that. Always braggin' about what they done, but they never went through anything like that."

Baxter eyed him curiously. "I guess you're right, Williams. Myself, I wouldn't care to go through it again, either."

Williams shrugged. "Well, you won't have to. You've bypassed Slim an' Chuck an' there's nobody else blockin' your way to Hassayampa. Say, how far is it from here to town, anyway?"

"Oh, about twelve or fifteen miles, I reckon."

Toad Williams glanced up at the sun. "Must be close to two o'clock," he said, "an' that's a four or five-hour hike. Maybe we better be startin' if we want to get there before dark."

Baxter turned away to hide a smile. "Maybe we had," he agreed, as he arose. He realized that he was without his gun now, and reached mechanically into his pocket for the handcuffs. But a second glance at his prisoner brought his hand away. Something in the other's prideful, child-like face told him he wouldn't need them. ●END

Wells Fargo needed a driver and so I took the job.

A LITTLE CLOUD OF DUST

by NEIL SLOCUM

A no-good saddlebum, you could see it plain. And Pop Woodie could have broke the fellow in two, but he didn't, because his girl Adeline was in love with this fast-talking ranny.....

THE LITTLE parlor in the home of Granny and Granddad looked especially warm and inviting on this cold winter's night, the round-oak stove glowing with a cheery spot of red. Three of us youngsters sat in anxious and eager expectancy, our feet shuffling noiselessly on the padded rag carpet, waiting for the exciting story that had been promised us.

And we had waited impatiently for some time for this moment, our inquisitive young minds fired by lurid tales of the Old West casually referred to now and then by our parents, and by relatives and elders who visited us on occasion. Sometimes the voices of these visitors would contain a note of skeptical derision about the days when Granddad drove the stage through the Black Hills and the bad lands, but these disbelieving comments only annoyed us, whetted our interest in the story that we felt only Granddad could tell.

"Some of it ain't nice for younguns to hear," declared Granny, "but maybe you are old enough now so it won't hurt you. He don't often like to remember it, but sometimes he gets spells and likes to talk."

Granddad stood with his back to the fire, a sturdy man in his late seventies, with large hands and fingers. His left leg had been amputated above the knee, and his trouser leg was always neatly folded and pinned in back of the stump. His body was partly held upright by a heavy home-made crutch, leather covered where it fitted into the armpit, and the handle, halfway down between the oak stems, was worn

smooth and slightly ridged where powerful fingers had gripped it through the years.

There was also a short, thick cane with an angle handle which was used in various ways besides as an aid in walking; such as a pointer, and to tap us kids on the legs when we got in his way. Heavy white hair reached nearly to his shoulders, and was always neatly combed. Keen grey-blue eyes looked out over a bushy beard, that was, on occasion, and at Granny's insistence, trimmed a little; but no razor had ever touched his face.

Granny was busily knitting. The oil lamp with the flaring shade, grotesquely decorated with funny looking dragons, cast a warm light on the lower part of her wrinkled, kindly face; a face seamed, but somehow softened too, by the rigorous years of toil in which she'd mothered six children, three boys and three girls, my mother having been the oldest of the girls. It seemed strange to think of Granny and Granddad as ever having been anything but old. They were something we always took for granted, like school and Christmas.

"Hank," said Granny, "the children want to hear about the days when you drove the stage. This might be a good time to tell them about it."

The big moment had come at last. I thought he was never going to speak, but he did. With hands folded in back of him, warm to the fire, and a reminiscent look in his eyes, he began...

I recollect, Granddad said, back in '76, the time the snow was deeper than the length of a bull-whip in places. Seemed like it would never thaw, but the sun came out and warmed the pine-covered hills and afterwhile it was all gone and time to hang up the traps, curry the horses and take the stage out again.

COME SPRING, Lem Peters was took with rheumatis' and couldn't hyst himself on the top anymore, so Wells Fargo had to get a driver. I being handy, and liking horses, they give me a chance. Start was from Deadwood, over a trail that was mostly rock on the humps and dust in the low places that would turn to soft mud when heavy water come down through the draws.

Going through the Black Hills wasn't so bad 'cept when the lead horse would spot a rattler wound up in the road, then the critter would shy evertime and wouldn't go until the flathead slid away. Fordin' the streams was the worst and sometimes it was all the six horses could do to haul through when the water was hub deep. Flat, brush country sure looked good, but there wasn't to much of it on the run to Arvada on Powder River, which was as far as I went—close to a hundred miles, I reckon. There was two places on the way where I'd stay all night and change horses.

Course, there was other things to bother, the Injuns rising up and making trouble in the south and north, and reports about the Bartlow boys trail-riding and robbing another bank. Whenever I hauled gold they would put Pete Winders alongside of me for guard, and all told, if luck was riding with me I could get back to Deadwood in a week.

I was just a young feller then, all stringy meat, and tough as a hickory knot. I got to staying at Pop Woodie's tavern, which was the place where the stage pulled out, and the grub was good. His real name was Jacob Woodrige, but everyone called him just plain "Pop", or Pop Woodie." He owned the tavern and took care of people and their belongings. The saloon he had built on one side was the main gathering place for the boys. Pop was sort of short and heavy and bald, and strong as a corn fed ox and just as mean.

When he saw trouble coming on among the boys, he would send his daughter into the back kitchen, and I've seen him pick up a feller like a sack of meal and throw him clear out against the hitch rail. But what I started to tell you about was his daughter Adeline, Addie was crowdin' 18, and the prettiest bit of a teain' bundle of calico you ever did see, what with them brown eyes that could flash and laugh and cry all at the same time, long chestnut hair she

could curl on her finger, and dimples when she smiled—which was most of of the time.

Addie helped her pa run that tavern pretty nice, her ma being dead some four years. Looked after the folks that stayed in the rooms, sold tickets for the stage, and in the evening, tended bar with her pa.

Of course all the boys was gone on her and showed it, and some that wasn't boys any more too, but she treated them all alike, like each was the greatest scalawag she ever knew. Everything run smooth until that slick feller came along. He hitched his sorrel and come ambling into the bar one evening, looking around sharp at everone. When Addie turned around he looked at her like he'd never seen a pretty girl bfore.

Addie give him her nice smile and says, "Can I serve you?"

He smiled right back, showing some awful nice teeth, under a little moustache. "Yes," he finally said, "An ounce of redeye in a glass of water."

HE WAS A mighty nice-looking young feller, especially when he off his hat and showed a lot of brown curly hair. He couldn't have been more'n 19 or 20. I couldn't figure him out. He was man grown all right, six foot of long shanks and wide shoulders. He was wearing a buckskin jacket fringed around the top and a shiny-handled gun stuck handy-like in his belt. I could tell by the worn look on his pants and the shine on the insides of his boots that he'd been trail-riding a-plenty, but he didn't look tired, especially after he saw Addie.

Everyone was looking at him and pretty soon he turned around, still holding his hat and said, "Boys, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Andy Parker from Silver City, bought an interest in a mine down that way. I was just riding through, but I like the looks of this town and the people in it, and maybe I'll stay a spell. Everybody have a drink on me."

When Addie started to fill his glass he just put his hand over it and gave her a smile along with a twenty-dollar gold piece and told her to keep the change. Afterwhile he got in on a card game with three of the boys, but I could tell by the way he handled the cards he was no gamblin' shark. He won a little money then lost it.

After a time he shoved his chair back, put his hat on the table and stood up. "I feel like singing," he said. "Anyone got an objection?"

No one said anything so he started. He had a real nice voice and sung some old song I've forgot. When it was finished there was quite a lot of handclapping and he sung another.

Then he said, "Here's one you all know. Why don't you pitch in and help me out with it? Come on, all of you."

He started singing Old Black Joe, and before everyone quite realized it they was hummin' and singin' it with him, includin' me. We sung it again, him waving his hands.

Finally he said, "Here's one we sing a lot back East, if any of you boys know it, go ahead and sing. I'll sing this especially for the charming Miss Adeline."

He had learned her name by this time, and he sung one of the prettiest songs you ever heard. I want try to sing it for you, but I can still remember some of the words, they went like this,

"Sweet Adeline, for you I pine,
You're the idol of my heart,
Sweet Adeline."

I looked at Addie. She was smiling and there was a light in her eyes the likes of which I had never seen before.

Andy said, "We need a quartette to properly sing that," and he started picken' us out. "Come over here, you, and you too, big feller. I heard you singin' a good bass." He beckoned to each of us. "Name is Hank," I said.

"All right, Hank, come over here I'll teach you how to harmonize."

He had such a nice friendly way about him, and I could tell he had lots more learning than the most of us. Well sir, we kept at it and had a lot of fun. The crowd got bigger at the bar everyone was laughing and clapping their hands at us. People seemed to forget their troubles and grudges, and before the evening was over we was doing pretty well.

The next night we done the same

thing over, of course comin' in strong with Sweet Adeline."

"We'll sernade her," Andy said with a laugh.

THE NEXT day I had to go out with the stage. When I was almost to Arvada, a wheel got wedged in a rut and the darn thing broke at the hub. Almost tipped over. Was held up for three or four days, to get a new wheel made. When I got back to Deadwood, Pop Woodie cornered me in the barn the first thing.

"Hank," he says, "I got troubles. Addie says she is goin' to marry this young Andy feller. He's asked her right and proper and is havin' a house built about two miles out, gettin' ready for it. There's something about him I don't take to. Always fiddle-footin' around. Claims to be from Silver City. Always makin' talk to Addie about back East. He wa'nt brung up in the West like us. Where's his money come from, and where's this mine he claims to own some of? I come right out and told Addie she couldn't marry him."

"What did she say?" I asked.

Pop looked like a sheep that's just been whacked over the rump with a barrel stave.

"She said, 'Pop, you're a silly old darling. You know very well I'll do just as I please—just like Mother did.' Hank, what am I goin' to do?"

I looked at this stocky man with his powerful arms, the man I'd seen pick up a feller bigger than himself and throw him ten feet against a hitch rail, yet he couldn't handle a slip of a girl!

"Pop," I says, "It looks like you couldn't do nothin'."

About two weeks later when I got back to Deadwood they got married. Andy grabbed me by the hand and says, "Hank, I've been waiting for you. I want you to stand up at my wedding—be best man, and Addie wants it too."

I had never seen a wedding before but it went off pretty nice. They had a preacher and all and it was held right there in the tavern. Pop was pretty good natured about it too. After the ceremony Addie came up to me and kissed me on the cheek and said, "You were supposed to do that, you big know-nothing, so I'll have to do it for you."

Well, the boys all hollered and some of them put a few bullets in the ceiling, and Pop offered free drinks at the bar. We all sung "Sweet Adeline" for the last time.

Andy had rented the only buggy Smitty had in his stable—a carryall, and I can see them now as they rode away; Addie all smiles and waving her hand and Andy flourishing the whip in the air.

IT WAS ABOUT a month later in Arvada, when I was waiting in the stage office and readin' a notice about a reward offered by some bank that had been held up, when this feller come up to me. He asked me if I knew a lot of people in Deadwood. I said, "Sure, about all of them, I guess."

I looked him over. He was kind of short and stocky, about 40 I judged. He was wearing store clothes with big pockets on the sides, and a little hard round hat. His whiskers was all shaved off clean and he had a funny way of looking right past you when he was talkin' and keeping his hands in his side pockets.

"I'm looking for a relative," he said. "My wife's younger brother. My name is William Brown. Did you ever notice a young fellow down your way, fellow about 20, curly brown hair, about six foot tall, likes to sing when he's feeling good?"

"Why yes," I said. "I know such a feller." And then I wished I hadn't, for I noticed he was looking right past me at a notice on the wall that said something about a $500.00 reward, dead or alive. "What do you want to find him for?" I asked.

He looked at me quick-like, and his eyes got kind of squinty. He said, "Oh, nothing much. Just a family affair. The boy quarreled with his mother over money—wanted to borrow some but she wouldn't give in. He got made and run away from home. That was four years ago. His mother is sick now and can't last much longer, and I told her and my wife I would do my best to find him. We think he is around these parts someplace. Is he living in Deadwood?"

"Might be," I said, cautious—like.

"Well then, I'll just get on the stage and go along with you and have a talk with him."

The story sounded reasonable and I figured it was all right. On the haul back to Deadwood, the short man didn't say much more about it, even at the stops where we stayed overnight. He was friendly and didn't ask any more questions. We pulled into Deadwood and he got a room at the tavern and we had supper.

Afterwards he said, "Now my friend, if you will, just show me where my brother-in-law lives I'll be much obliged."

Told him I was figuring on going out there the next day, but he said he didn't have much time and wanted to see his relative tonight. Told him it was about two miles out and we would get some horses at Smitty's. He said he wasn't much of a horseman and would prefer a buggy; so we got the carry-all and started out.

We found Addie alone, but she was real glad to see me and a relative of Andy's. Said Andy had been gone for over a week and should have been back before this. They were going East to live as soon as Andy took care of business about his mine. Just then we heard a horse coming into the yard and she said that must be him now.

Andy came busting in and stopped dead short when he saw us. Addie started to say something about his greeting his relative but stopped—without finishing. William Brown stood there with a cold look in his gray eyes, hands in his side pockets. Presently he spoke, and his voice was like his eyes.

"James Bartlow, don't move! I've got a gun leveled on you. I am a United States Detective and I'm arresting you for bank robbery and murder. Step forward with your hands out and close together."

A strange look came into Andy's eyes, like a wild animal with wolves all around him, closing in for the kill. He grabbed his gun, and I think both men fired at the same time. Only difference was, the lawman missed his target but Andy didn't. This detective fellow sunk to the floor. His left hand came out of his pocket and some handcuffs rattled on the boards.

Andy stood there looking at him for a minute then he turned to me, "This is for you, Hank, for double-crossin' a friend."

His gun lowered toward my feet. I realized he didn't intend to kill me. I never carried a gun. His bullet smashed my knee.

Andy turned to his wife and said, "Adeline, I've got to go now, but I'll be back."

WE HEARD his horse going down down the road—poundin' fast. Addie didn't say a word, but she was awful white. My leg buckled under the weight of me and I could feel the hard leather of my boot getting soggy from blood.

Somehow, Addie got me in the carry-all and drove me to her pa's tavern. She never went back.

Old Doc Peters looked at that busted knee and shook his head, but he fixed it up with bandages. Two days later he told me the leg would have to come off because blood-poison had set in. Well, they laid me on a table in a back room, put me to sleep and it was done. Addie took care of me everyday, but it was a long time before I could get out of bed and make myself a crutch. Got used to it in time and was able to help Pop a little around the tavern.

It was maybe six months before Andy came back—but he did—riding down the street on a fine-looking black horse, and him in a soldier uniform with brass buttons and shiny boots and a gun holstered on his belt. He tied up and came in and looked tired.

When he saw me he was kind of shocked and asked, "How did that happen, Hank?'

"I guess you know," I told him.

Pop started to steam up. I could see the muscles in his jaw swell like whipcord. "Get outten my place or I'll throw you out," he yelled.

But I held him back, saying, "Go easy; Pop, he's a U. S. soldier sure enough. It would only bring on trouble. We don't want no more of it."

He calmed down somewhat.

"I come to see my wife," said Andy. "Where is she?"

Just then Addie came out of the kitchen and stopped with a little jerk, like she'd hit a dry rut.

"Addie, I've come back to explain a few things," said Andy. "To tell you I'm sorry—sorry I didn't tell you everything in the first place. I've quit all that and joined the Army to try to make up for some of the things that was wrong. I'm awful sorry about Hank. I don't know it happened, but I ain't sorry about shootin' that law man.

"He would have killed me anyway, sooner or later. All he wanted was the reward and he'd have got it the easy way. I did help steal money three of four times, but I didn't kill anybody. One of the Bartlow boys done that. When I get through with the Army we can go back East to live."

ADDIE LOOKED sort of white, but her mouth showed firm as she said, "Andy, I'll never go back to you. I could never live with a man I know they would hang someday. You're safe now, hidin' behind a uniform, but it won't last. Us folks that was raised out here look at it different. You have to pay for the wrongs you do—one way or another. Besides, I'm not rightfully your wife anyway. You gave a wrong name."

"I give my right name," said Andy. "I was only sixteen when I come West and got in with the Bartlow boys and took their name. I'll prove to you I will make up for everything—as you say—one way or another. I've got to get back to camp now. I'm with General Custer's outfit. Injun trouble again, as you probably know. Old Sitting Bull stirrin' up things. Soon as it's over, I'll come back."

We watched him as he rode up the street, a little cloud of dust sort of hiding him as he went.

It wasn't more than two weeks when a rider, all covered with trail dirt and on a horse streaked with foamy sweat, brought us the news—the awful news. You can read it about it in your school books—how General Custer and every last soldier of his'n was killed at the Little Big Horn.

A lot of the boys volunteered to help with the burying, but I couldn't go. Then I heard about a job in Iowa which was mostly looking after the mail and selling tickets for the stage, and didn't take much leg work. Well, I got that job and worked at it until the railroad come through...

Granddad stopped abruptly, lost in thought, and the room became strangely quiet, with a stillness that one hesitated to interrupt. Us youngsters, living very much in the future, began to feel something of the toil and tragedy, the hardships and heartaches, that were a part of the old West. We looked at Granny. I thought she was sitting a little more erect than usual in her high-backed rocker, plying her needles vigorously. Her wrinkled face, seamed with the toil of years, yet looked pinkish in the dim lamplight; or maybe it was the reflection of the stove which now glowed red all around its bulging middle.

"But Granddad," I blurted out, "Is that all of it? What became of Adeline?"

The faded blue eyes, misty with memories, slowly turned towards Granny and lingered fondly. Granddad always addressed her as "Mother," but tonight he said quietly, "S'posin' you tell them the rest, Addie!" ● END

THE ROUGH THREE

by LEE FLOREN

No pack of w o l v e s or humans was too tough for them to meet and defeat, and this savage wilderness trio truly had nothing to fear but———themselves . . .

MIKE FINK was a giant—roaring and red-headed and wild. One of Ashley's original trappers, he was known in the Wilderness as a dead shot—at rendezvous after rendezvous he demonstrated his uncanny accuracy with pistol or long-gun, winning shooting match after match. Nothing stopped him—not hail, not storm, not bullets. He had only one friend in life, and this was another trapper as wild and reckless as he, and this man was named Carpenter. Just plain "Carpenter." Maybe somewhere and at some time Carpenter had had a given name, but history records him as just plain Carpenter—but not an ordinary man, this Carpenter, any more than his partner, Mike Fink, was an ordinary man.

Ashley organized his trappers in St. Louis in 1822, and Mike Fink and Carpenter were among the first to enlist to head north and west into the Missouri River wilderness.

They fought and they caroused and they gambled, these two—and what one lacked in wiliness and strength and ferocity, the other supplemented. Both came out of Kentucky, and the wilderness was their dish—there were squaws to be won and furs to be trapped and rendezvous to attend. There was whiskey to be sent tumbling down a man's gullet and there were shooting matches to be won. The world was their oyster and they were opening it with wild abandon.

There came to this partnership at this time a third member, a mighty little man named Talbeau, whose given name seems also to have been lost in the shuffle of Time and Fate. A man of strong appetites, this Frenchman; a man who could use his fists, who grinned when the blood ran down his face. He recognized these two as fellow savages, as wild as the prairie wolves they trapped, and he joined them, using his influence to maintain peace when trouble threatened between Fink and Carpenter.

So they traveled and trapped the wilderness, these three and no river was too wide or violent to cross, no pack of wolves or humans too tough to meet and defeat, and no barrel of whiskey too vile to throw down their throats.

"The rough three," a trapper said. "Actin' like brothers is supposed to act. You whip one an' you gotta whip them all."

"An' all good shots," another said, watching Fink and Carpenter and Talbeau shooting cans off each other's heads at the Green River Rendezvous. They stood about fifty feet apart and each had a can placed on his head. With each shooting, cans flew in all directions, the men under them escaping untouched by the singing pistol bullets.

"No-sir, they never miss," another grizzled mountain man marveled.

But there did come a time when Mike Fink missed. At one rendezvous Mike Fink fell in love. And when Mike fell in love he fell in boots and torso and shoulders and head. He always did things in a big, big way.

The falling in love, of course, was inevitable, for Mike was strong and healthy of body. And this was not an

ordinary squaw. This was a half-breed.

Her father had been an itinerant French trader and her mother was a Blood. From her father she had inherited an olive-complexioned beauty and deep-deer eyes that could melt the Milk River ice in February. And history records that when she turned those doe-like orbs on one Mike Fink his sturdy heart did flip-flops with and of joy.

She was the girl for him!

But Carpenter also was aware of the dusky female's curvaceous beauty. And Carpenter was no retiring male—he was not one to stand to one side and see the love of his life wooed and won by his brother trapper.

SO THEY both set out to win the hand of the maiden, whose name history does not seem to remember. Had the girl been all-Indian undoubtedly she would have shared her favors with both but alas—from her French father she had apparently inherited scruples! Early in the courtship this fact became apparent to Fink and Carpenter and more so to Mike Fink, because the half-breed plainly favored Carpenter...and this hurt more than the fact he could not win her. Love was one thing, but pride was even stronger.

"I'm gonna make her my wife," Fink told Carpenter. "I'm gonna marry her!" He must have paused at this moment and reflected upon the irony of having scruples. Was he slipping his trap-chain? *Him,* getting married! Then his pride flowed in, strong and demanding, and made him say, "She ain't gonna marry you, Carpenter!"

"She's gonna marry me," Carpenter said strongly.

They stood nose-to-nose and belly-to-belly with their fists clenched and they glared at each other like two bull moose ready too entangle their horns. Talbeau watched and chewed tobacco and shifted his moccasins and glanced covertly at the Blood maiden. This was getting serious. He wanted the trio to stay together, for in numbers was strength and in strength was safety. His job was to keep peace between these two tree-benders, and accordingly he moved his scant bulk into the breech.

"Boys, don't fight over this squaw. You two are buddies, and they's thousands of loose squaws roamin' aroun'—"

"I ain't that kind of a woman," the halfbreed said angrily. "The man who gets me has to marry me, and I want—" She stopped then, blushing as her eyes rested on Carpenter. There was a deep silence.

Mike Fink took another long drink of Taos Lightnin'. "I know you kinda cotton to this fella here," he rumbled from his massive chest, "but he ain't the man for you, woman. Come a few days an' you'll get dog-tired of him! What you need is a man like I am—tough and strong an' one who can satisfy you in every way!"

"You don't make them remarks about me," Carpenter roared angrily. "I can take you in marbles or settin' traps or a fist fight or anything you want to name, Fink!"

"They ain't no use of us beatin' each other outa shape," Mike Fink said. "We've tried thet before an' always fit to a draw. We oughta settle this some other way, Carpenter."

The halfbreed watched, dark eyes worried now. She wanted Carpenter and she would take no other...unless the other was forced on her! It was Talbeau who again intervened.

"What plan you got to settle this, Mike?" demanded the small Frenchman.

"Well, we could shoot cans," Mike said slowly, grinning all the time. Then to Carpenter, "Or are you afraid to shoot it out that way with me, Carpenter? Is thet your knees I hear a-knockin'?"

"I can outshoot you any day of the week," Carpenter fumed, "an' twice on Sunday."

"This ain't Sunday," Mike Fink said. He turned to the halfbreed maiden. "That set well with you, Sweetheart?" Before she could answer he was speaking again to Carpenter. "We'll take turns, and the man what misses the can first, loses. We have to draw to see who shoots first. Ain't thet right, Talbeau?"

(please turn to page 91)

PEACEMAKER MEANS POWDER SMOKE

by D. B. NEWTON

AT FIRST, Deputy Lee Kirk couldn't find the words he wanted. Could only stand there and look at the warrant Sheriff Cowley had put down in front of him, on the desk.

Then he swallowed a tight knot that had come into his throat, and met the gaze of the other's gray eyes. "You—you're giving me this job?" he asked in a dull, flat voice.

Cowley nodded. "I know it's tough, Lee," he admitted. "And I'm damn sorry."

"But—but why me? You know how it's always been. Del and I ...."

The sheriff's face was filled with sympathy. But he only repeated: "I'm sorry!"

Kirk met his look during long, silent seconds. And then, slowly, he was unpinning the deputy's star from his shirt front and dropping it, with a small metallic sound, upon the scarred desk top.

Cowley watched it fall. He sat with head bent, so that Kirk could only see the crown of his silvery hair. He said heavily: "So that's how you feel, Lee?"

KIRK spread his hands helplessly. Tried to answer, but the words that struggled to his lips were all the wrong ones. How could he explain, or let the older man know the pain that clutched him as he relinquished that badge of office? The badge he had been proud to wear and serve?

All he managed to say was, "Del Brannon's my best friend, Joe. And if I go out and bring him in—it'll be me puttin' him in the pen!"

"He tried to murder Ward Shipton," the other reminded him. "Shot him down in cold blood. Oh, I know; he had plenty of cause, after the way Shipton rode and rode him on that mortgage and then finally took his spread away from him, and left him and Jimmy with nothing but the clothes on their backs. That's an awful blow for a man who's struggled as long and hard as Brannon did."

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★TIME-HONORED WESTERN CLASSICS★

Sure Del Brannon had bucked the law, taking justice in his own hands bullet-blasting a range-hog, but Del was still Deputy Lee Kirk's sad-dlepard . . .

"It about drove him crazy! Del wasn't hardly in his right mind, the other night."

"I know, I know, Lee!" The sheriff looked like a very tired, very weary man. "The whole deal was rotten; but it was legal. And Brannon went

square against the law when he tried to take justice into his own hands by puttin' a bullet in Shipton...."

"If that's the law," said Kirk, icily, "then maybe I ain't so anxious as I thought I was to work for it."

The sheriff shrugged then, tiredly. "All right, Lee. I won't argue with you. But I guess this will about cost me the election next month!"

"How do you figure?" Kirk demanded.

"You know how hard Shipton's working against me. How he's making an issue out of this shooting—and he's got the power to break me if I let Brannon get away. But on the other hand, since that tip we got that Shan Dupree and his gang are headin' into this territory with an eye on the bank, Shipton's kept my hands full with that. He insists on me giving my time to protectin' his blessed bank: he wants me on hand personally, every minute. The trap we've got planted will bag Dupree and his whole outfit, if they once walk into it; but meantime, how am I gonna go out after Brannon?"

Wearily, the officer ran a hand through graying hair. "Shipton's tryin' to squeeze me into a crack, so that he can pry me out of office. That's why I was sort of counting on you—"

That stopped Lee Kirk. If he owned friendship to Del Brannon he had another debt to Sheriff Joe Crowley; the old officer who had hired him, and tried to teach him everything there was to know about working for the law. He knew that Cowley's heart was in his job, though the pay was entirely understaffed. Lee knew just how much that next month's election meant to him....

He sighed heavily; quietly, then, he took up the star again and pinned it on his shirt with stiff, wooden fingers. Picked up the warrant.

"I'm sorry, Joe," he said. "You're right. I'll get Del for you, if he's still in the country. After that—well, maybe then I'll still be wanting to turn in my badge!"

Cowley didn't try to speak his thanks. He only nodded, with infinite gratitude and understanding written in his weary, carelined face. Sat there for long minutes after Kirk dragged on his sombrero and legged it out of the office.

It didn't make Lee Kirk any happier that he would see Ward Shipton, the moment he came out on the street. The banker still carried his arm in a sling, although most people agreed that Del Brannon's lead hadn't crippled him up as bad as he pretended.

MAYBE IT was handling money that made Shipton the way he was; but at any rate, he didn't seem to have a drop of warm blood in his body. He saw the deputy and called to him, now, across the sunlit street: "I'm expecting quick action from the sheriff's office, on the warrant. I swore out for Brannon! The citizens of this county have a right to protection from being shot down on the public streets!"

The threat was there behind the words. Shipton was reminding him of his personal power in the county, and hinting that a change of sheriff at the next election would be in order and forthcoming if his attacker hadn't been brought to justice by that time. And this, despite the fact that Shipton was keeping Cowley in hot water every minute, anyway, with the threat of Dupree's designs on the bank!

Kirk made no reply to the banker's thrust. Instead, he tightened his jaw against hot words he might have said, merely stood there with arms akimbo staring across at the other. Shipton laughed bitterly to himself, at that, and went on into the bank with Kirk's eyes hard as they followed his well-fed, portly figure.

Sometimes, when he thought of how Shipton had foreclosed just about the time Del Brannon was beginning to see his way clear to pay the mortgage on his little spread, Kirk almost wished Del's bullet had killed the old man, instead of merely winging him!

But then, of course, that would have meant a hang noose instead of a jail term for Brannon. Prison would be bad enough. It would about kill an outdoor man like Del. And especially when he'd spend those years behind the bars knowing the crime he was paying for had been futile, and that Shipton had come through it with

nothing worse than a sore shoulder.

As he went down the sidewalk to the hitch pole where he'd racked his pony, Kirk decided there was only one thing good about this: There was a chance he couldn't find Brannon. Even though Del was probably still around, sticking close to town so he could keep an eye on his kid brother who was staying now with some friends who'd taken him in. There were plenty of places in the tumbled hills where an hombre on the dodge could hole in for a few weeks; it was that kind of country. And if Kirk couldn't find him, he wouldn't have to arrest his friend.

But then Shipton would railroad Sheriff Cowley out of office at the next election. Oh, hell! Any way you looked at it....

Kirk jerked his pony loose with an angry tugs at the reins. Lifted into the saddle. As he backed into the sun-drenched street and went cantering off through town, his mind was a confusion of bitter thoughts.

Down in front of the blacksmith's shop he caught a glimpse of Ward Shipton's boy, Larry. He liked Larry. Just a ten-year-old kid full of life and mischief, but he was a definite improvement over his old man. He and Jimmy Brannon played around together a lot, when the banker would let them. The feud between their elders didn't mean anything to their friendship.

Larry waved a hand as Kirk rode past, yelled "Hi, Mr. Kirk!" Lee waved back. Then another boy came running out of the shop. Jimmy Brannon. He gave a whoop and bounded through the dust on strong bare feet. "Gimme a lift, Lee!" he begged.

KIRK grinned, put down a hand and hauled Del's kid brother up with him. Jimmy grabbed the saddle-horn, hung on. "Heard anything from Del?" he piped.

"Nope."

"I've found out where he's at. He's—"

The deputy gave a convulsive start. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Don't—"

"He's stayin' in that old mining shack up on Venner Ridge!"

In vain, Kirk had tried to stop that rush of words by clapping a hand over Jimmy's mouth; but he was too slow. The news was out. As he dropped his hand away, wearily, the boy stared at him in amazement. "Gee! What's the matter?" He touched his jaw. Kirk must have hurt him.

"Sorry Jimmy," the deputy muttered. "Didn't mean to be rough. You better get down now. I got work to do!"

Then he swung the kid down and rode off leaving him standing there in the dust looking after him with wonder written in his features.

Kirk's face was a hard mask as he jogged out of town and took the trail that would lead him to Venner Ridge. What a hell of a way for things to work out! Jimmy had been so happy to tell him where to find Del Brannon, because Kirk was Del's friend; and Kirk would have to use that knowledge to betray both of them. To bring Del in for the law.

There was nothing else he could do about it, of course. He still wore his badge, and he still owed it to Joe Cowley to bring the lawbreaker in and save the election. But why did it have to happen like this!

Jimmy, he knew, would never understand. He'd only know that Kirk had betrayed a trust, and was putting his brother away in the hell of bars, and stone.

The worst of it was that he had forgotten all about that mining shack. He would never have thought of looking there if Jimmy hadn't told him! The Venner mine hadn't been operating in twenty years, and this was the last remains of the days of its prosperity. This shack, and the pit gouged into the face of the mountain, and the scars of slag and diggings that Nature and time were slowly healing. It was, he realized now, a good place for a desperate man to hide. Del had been there over a week, an nobody the wiser. That is, not until this moment....

Sunset was fading when Lee Kirk came in sight of the abandoned mine. There was, he saw at once, a plume of smoke lifting from the battered

stove-pipe chimney. Del was cooking supper.

He dismounted in the shelter of some scrub oak, walked up the weed-grown trail. The man inside heard the sound of his arrival over the sizzle of meat on the stove; he came to the door with a rifle ready in his hands. But when he saw who it was, Brannon's face lighted up with joy and he yelled out greeting. "Lee!" he shouted. "Lee Kirk! Damn, but it's good to see you!"

Misery ate at Kirk's heart as he saw Del's grin, felt the hand slapping his back, let himself be ushered into the shack and set down in the only chair. Brannon didn't suspect anything, either. No more than Jimmy had. Sure, Kirk was a deputy sheriff; he had the badge on his shirt now. But that didn't make any difference. He was Del's friend.

"How'd you find out where I was?" Del wanted to know.

"Jimmy told me," Lee muttered.

"Oh, sure." Now Brannon was at the stove, spearing meat with a rusty fork. "You're just in time to have something to eat with me. This ain't exactly the style there used to be on my ranch, but it'll have to do."

HE BROUGHT two plates of food, two cups of steaming coffee; ragged up a packing box and faced Kirk across the rickety table.

"Where'd you get all the vittles?" asked Kirk.

Brannon merely nodded, knowingly. "I'm making out." He started to eat, heartily. "How you doing lately? Been busy?"

Kirk nodded, watching Brannon eat. He didn't want any himself. Didn't think he could choke any of it down. It was bad enough to sit here and see the way Del tore into his food, with the eagerness of a hungry man, and blissfully secure in his knowledge of Kirk's friendship.

He shrugged, heavily. The longer this thing dragged out, the harder it was going to be to go through with it. But his fingers shook a little as they reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the legal paper. He couldn't look at Brannon; just dropped the warrant on the table top and said, miserably: "This is for you, Del. I'm sorry."

He heard the hiss of his friend's indrawn breath, the clatter of knife and fork as they dropped into his plate. Then there was silence. A painful silence that weighed heavier with every lagging second.

Slowly, then, Lee Kirk raised his head, looked at Del Brannon-gaped into the black muzzle of the six-gun in Brannon's fist.

"That's the deal is it?" Del's face was twisted with his sorrow and the beginning of anger. "That's your kind of friendship! Gettin' Jimmy to tell you where I was, and then riding up here knowing I wouldn't suspect anything when I saw you coming, even if you did have a tin star on your chest. Because we'd been friends for eight years!"

"I'm sorry, Del," Kirk repeated, doggedly. "I couldn't help this. I tried to get out of it; but it couldn't be done!"

"The devil it couldn't! Well, I'm telling you, Kirk: you ain't taking me in! Nobody is gonna put me behind bars!"

Futilely, Kirk tried to reason with him, even as his hands struggled upward in the face of that six-gun in Brannon's grasp, knowing talk was useless. "It would only be for a few years, Del. After all, you didn't actually kill Shipton; although I guess he'll use all his power to see that you do get sent up for some kind of a term. But when it's all over, you'll be square with the world and can make a new start. That'd be better than dodging the law all the rest of your life. There's Jimmy to think of—"

"It's Jimmy I am thinking about! What's he gonna do all those years I'm in the pen?"

Kirk said: "I'll look after him."

Del snorted at that. "After you used him to find out where I was hiding, do you think he's apt to want to have anything much to do with you again?" Brannon shook his head. "No, Kirk! It's no go. I'm not ridin' back with you. I've met some guys since. I been on the dodge—hombres that are willing to throw in with me because of the information I can

give them. After tonight, both Jimmy and me will be taken care of!"

THE DEPUTY stared at him. "What are you talking about!" he demanded.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Del pushed back from the table, stood up with the gun level in his hand. "I reckon I ought to plug you, Kirk, for a double-crossing rat; but I guess I can't. I ain't forgotten we used to be friends once, even if you have."

"Honest to God, Del—"

"Shut up!" He threw open the door on gathering dusk, cast a glance down the trail, "These friends of mine will be coming in a few minutes and it wouldn't be particularly healthy for you if they saw you." He motioned with the gun. "Come on. I better take care of you before they get here."

Kirk moved woodenly as he stood up, with arms at shoulder height. Face expressionless, he stepped out of the shack ahead of the man with the gun. As he passed Brannon, the latter snaked the six-gun out of the deputy's holster, thrust it into his own waistband. They went in silence along the face of the hill. Boots scuffing in loose rubble, weeds whipping their legs as they followed the old path toward the dark mouth of the mine pit, above them.

When they reached the opening, Kirk hesitated; but a jab from Brannon's gun sent him on into the narrow tunnel. "This'll do," said the other. Kirk waited, uncertainly. And then his arms were jerked down behind his back and felt the burn of a rope scraping his wrists.

In a few minutes Brannon had him tied hand and foot, and lying on the floor of the dark mine cut. "Hope you don't get too uncomfortable," he said. "You won't be there long—maybe a few hours. We're headin' out as soon as we finish our job tonight, but I'll find some way to get you loose. I just don't want you mixing up our plans; and I don't want Shan to lay eyes on you."

Then he was gone. Leaving Kirk alone in the dark of the tunnel's throat, and with sudden understanding striking him like a blow. Shan! Shan Dupree and his guncrowd! Del Brannon had joined up with them, and he was going to help in the raid on the bank at the county seat—tonight! He remembered what Del had said about the hombres who were glad to throw in with him because of the information he could give them. Information about the town, and the layout of the bank building!

But there was one thing Del didn't know and couldn't tell them—that Sheriff Cowley and the banker were ready for them, had a trap all planned to spring when Dupree tried his play. Del would be riding into that trap with the outlaw crew—maybe riding to his death!

Kirk tried to yell, to call after Brannon and bring him back. But his voice was muffled against the rock floor of the tunnel where he lay; and by the time he managed to roll over, Del was gone out of hearing. Kirk lay there, then, with sweat standing on his brow; thinking in horror of what was to come that evening.

He thought he knew what had turned Brannon outlaw. The chance to even his score with Ward Shipton had appealed to him; and the chance for a cut in the loot from Shipton's bank, money that Jimmy would need. Running into Dupree and his gang must have seemed a lucky break, a good out for him. But instead, it would mean death in front of flaming guns, in the trap Sheriff Cowley had planned...

SUDDENLY, desperately, Kirk was struggling with his bonds. Fighting the knots that Brannon had worked in them. He had to get loose, to stop Del. He owed Jimmy that much. And too, Del was his friend; no matter what had happened.

But try as he would, he couldn't seem to do anything with the ropes that held him. Del had done too good a job with them. Kirk tore at the knots until his fingers were bleeding and the sweat streamed from his body, but he hadn't fazed them.

He started inching along the rock floor, then, toward the opening where

the early night made a splotch of gray. Hitching his body over the sharp rocks, like a huge earthworm. If he could get out into the open, he could yell and make Brannon hear him.

It was slow work. Slow and painful. And when he reached the mouth of the shaft he heard voices in the distance. At that very moment, a light in the mining shack went out and then there was the sound of hoofbeats on the rock, heading off over the weed-grown trail that led eventually to town. He couldn't tell how many, but it sounded like a small cavalcade of riders.

He was too late, then! Shan Dupree had come for Brannon, and the gang was already on its way!

For long minutes after the last sounds had died, Kirk lay panting from his efforts. Then, frantically, he was working at the ropes again. Twisting and pulling at the knots. He couldn't lie like this, helpless!

So desperately did he work that, suddenly, the ropes began to slip a little. Maybe the strain of crawling over the rocks had loosened them some, too. Kirk redoubled his efforts, praying for time and for every inch of slack that began to develop in the knots.

Then, they gave! First his arms were free and then his hands; after that there was quick work with the rest, and he was on his feet and hurrying out and down the slope on legs that trembled from the exertion.

He found his horse where he had hidden it in the brush; but the rifle scabbard was empty and Brannon still had his six-gun. No matter. He could try and dig up a weapon somewhere. Kirk came up into the saddle, backed his mount free of the brush. Eased out into the trail and lined out for town at a gallop.

How long that ride took he never clearly knew. He was too intent on peering ahead into the darkess, trying to catch a glimpse of Dupree's gang somewhere on the trail in front of him, thinking only of the trap Del Brannon was heading into. Once, topping the far horizon, he thought he saw four riders against the early moon; but they were gone again in a moment.

Kirk still hadn't caught up with them when he saw the lights of town winking on the plain, and a sickening fear arose within him that he was too late, and that he couldn't do any good. Couldn't stop Brannon. But he pounded on toward the growing pattern of lights; hoping to the last.

THEN there were houses and trees, and the rear of the bank building was just ahead. And back in the brush, fifty feet from the dark building, he came across a cavvy of four saddle horses, blowing. He rode up cautiously, thinking a guard might have been left with them; but decided not. He dismounted went quickly among the horses trying to find a rifle stuck in a scrabbard, or some other weapon, but there was nothing. He even looked in Del's saddle pockets, with the thought that the six-gun Brannon had taken from him might be there. But Brannon must still have it.

No more time to waste here. Kirk went on under the trees, emptyhanded, and came within sight of the bank just as four shadowy figures converged upon the rear door into Ward Shipton's office.

Lee Kirk knew the layout of the bank well. Shipton's office opened into the larger room that contained the cashier's counter and the vaults; and in that big room there would be guns waiting for Dupree and his gang. Sheriff Cowley would be there, and one or two of Shipton's hired guards. They'd be crouched in the dark, guns at their fingers. Maybe smoking, cracking jokes back and forth. But ready with death for anyone that should come.

They were at the outside door now. Even as Kirk melted out of the shadows and came stealthily along the wall, unnoticed, the hand of the leader took the knob and turned it. The door swung open!

Why hadn't that door been locked? It wasn't part of the plan. The idea was to let them force their way in, come clear through the office and into the main room before the trap was sprung. Kirk heard one of the outlaws swear a little under his

breath. Maybe Dupree and his men would get suspicious and give up their project.

No. They were slipping through the door now, one by one, easing into the shadows of the office. Kirk though the silhouette of the last to go in looked a lot like Del's. Next moment, he was starting for the black opening of the door, himself; but just as he reached the barred window next to it he stopped, stared.

A light had come up inside the little room. The feeble, flickering light of a candle. It had been sitting on the desk, under a box or something; and now somebody had yanked away the covering and let its yellow gleam spring out upon the room.

Kirk gasped. Though the window he saw the quartet of outlaws—heavy, dark-faced Shan Dupree; Del Brannon; and two others that he knew were Dupree's men, named Keno and Yance. They were fanned out in a half circle, just as they had been when the light flooded forth. And they were looking at the desk in the opposite corner.

There were two little boys standing behind the desk. Larry Shipton was holding the waste basket he'd just taken away from over the candle. And Jimmy Brannon wielded a big, oversized revolver with both hands.

"St-stick 'em up!" piped Jimmy, in a frightened voice. "We got the drop on you!"

The outlaws, gripped by their surprise, could only stand there and gape at those two kids with the big gun. Jimmy said, in his best imitation of a magazine hero: "O.K., Larry; I'll cover 'em while you go lift the hardware off'n the varmints!"

Larry Shipton gulped once, eyes glued to Shan Dupree's evil face. "S-sure, pal!" he agreed. But he circled wide as he started toward the bandits.

SUDDENLY he stopped, staring up at Del Brannon. Neither of the boys had really noticed him before. "Look, Jimmy!" Larry exclaimed.

Jimmy saw his brother, too. His lips moved as he whispered Del's name; and there was a world of shock and disappointment in his face. The gun sagged a little.

That gave Shan Dupree his chance. Before anyone knew what was happening he had leaped, grabbed Larry Shipton by the collar and dragged his thin body over across his own for a shield. His six-gun was in his hand, pointed unwavering at Jimmy.

"All right, kid!" he rasped. "Drop that gun, d'you hear?"

Jimmy gasped into the mouth of Dupree's weapon. Slowly his fingers opened and let the heavy gun drop to the desktop, off onto the floor.

Then Dupree brought the barrel of his sixshooter down in a savage blow across the head of Larry Shipton, helpless in his grasp; and Larry crumpled. The outlaw threw his senseless body to the floor.

The sight of that cruel blow tauted Lee Kirk, put his hands in a tight grip on the bars of the window to keep him from rushing in there, unarmed and helpless as he was.

At the same moment, Del Brannon was saying, with shock in his voice: "Good God, Dupree! What did you hit the kid for? That wasn't necessary!"

Shan Dupree grunted something. And then he was striding across the little room to the desk where Jimmy Brannon stood wild-eyed and frightened. Dupree's six-shooter was rising again.

"Dupree!" Del Brannon shouted the name. "Leave that boy alone! He's my brother!"

The outlaw didn't stop. He was right over Jimmy now. Del dragged his gun in a line on the big man. "If you touch him, I'll kill you!" he barked.

Dupree whirled. His black eyes burned into the other. Keno and Yance were standing half crouched, too, waiting to see what was going to come of this. They'd ridden with Dupree long enough to know you didn't cross him. Not if you were smart.

Suddenly, Jimmy Brannon reached out with both hands and dragged Dupree's gunwrist; dragged it aside. The jerk pulled the outlaw's thumb off the eared-back hammer, and the shot roared deafeningly.

The outlaw turned, slammed Jimmy

full in the face with a heavy fist.

"Damn you!" Brannon yelled, as the boy dropped. He brought up his gun and slapped a bullet past Dupree's ear. At that, nerves cracked. Either Yance and Keno let loose with a slug at Del.

Immediately, Lee Kirk was away from his window and sprinting the rest of the distance toward the open door. When he got to it. Brannon was down on one knee, triggering at Dupree; left arm hanging limp with blood soaking red into the shoulder of his shirt. The outlaw chief, over against the desk, was firing back. Keno was down, but Yance was adding his own lead to his boss's.

"Del!" shouted Kirk, from the door. "Give me my gun!"

BRANNON glanced over, saw him there. Stared in astonishment. But then he was throwing the weapon he had been firing, flipping it end over end. The deputy caught it. And Del was dragging out the other gun.

Together, they took up the fight. The gun Del had given him was hot in Kirk's hand, and half empty already. Even as he began to go easy with his bullets.

Lead from Brannon's gun put Yance on the floor, screaming. Next moment Del was slammed backward with the gun dropping from his hand. Mouth a grim line, then, Kirk brought his sixshooter around at Dupree, saw the savage look on the outlaw's face. He emptied his gun at the cruel visage.

Then there was silence. Silence, except for yells outside in the night; It had all happened so quickly that by the time Cowley could get to the door of the office, wrench it open, and come tumbling in with the bank guards at his heels, the battle was over.

In the confusion that followed, Kirk got to Del; saw that the blow that had knocked him out wasn't a bad one. But then he looked up and saw Jimmy standing near him, oblivious of a bloody nose. Just standing there looking miserably at his brother.

Something in his look gave Kirk an impulse. He heard himself saying, "Aren't you proud of Del, Jimmy? He and I cooked up this plan to capture Dupree and his gang, by making 'em think he'd joined up...."

Now, why had he said that? It was such a feeble lie, and Jimmy was bound to learn the truth. Right now, though, the kid's face had lost its solemn look and was beaming. "Gee!" he murmured. "Larry and me, we had us a plan, too. We got his dad's revolver and the key to the office door, and we was waitin' in here all evening for them guys to show up. We figured on gettin' the money so Del could buy our spread back from Larry's pa!"

Kirk tried to think then of words that could tell Jimmy what he thought of a pair of kids who would do a brave, foolish thing like that. But he didn't get them out for the voice of Ward Shipton interrupted.

He turned, looked up from where he kneeled at Brannon's side, to find the banker with the unconscious form of Larry in his arms.

"How's your boy?" the deputy asked.

The old man nodded. "He'll be all right. I guess I made a mistake, Kirk. Just now I found my key and my old six-shooter missing, and knew these boys were up to something; so I hurried over—and got here in time to see you and Brannon clean up Dupree's gang. I'll never forget the sight of Dupree clubbing my son, and I'll always be grateful to the men who evened the score with him. That—that means even more to me than keeping the bank from being robbed!"

THERE was a softness in Shipton's eyes, now, that no one had ever seen there before. And the bewilded look of a man whose values have shifted with a starting suddenness. "I'm willing to make amends to Del Brannon," he went on. "I'm withdrawing the charges against him; and if he wants to get back his ranch by paying the mortgage with the reward money, I'm agreeable."

He looked around, saw the stares the men in that little office were giving him. Saw the puzzled face of Sheriff Cowley. Grinned wryly. "O.K.," he said. "Rub it in! While

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SEVEN RODE OUT

by Joseph Chadwick

THE APACHES had long ago learned that by cutting down a few telegraph poles here and there, they could cripple the Army's best means of communication—and so bog down pursuit. But General Miles, who replaced Crook, was as wily as the Indians. He borrowed a British device, the heliostat, and soon a system of giant mirrors was flashing orders and reports over hundreds of miles of desert and mountains. B Troop, out of Camp Grant, picked up word of Orfano's marauding band from the heliostat, and promptly headed for the Pinals.

B Troop, under Captain Phil Hammond's command, had no Signal Corps personnel assigned to it, but Trooper Alec Small could read the code flashes. Trooper Small was new to B Troop, and until now his campaigning had been done behind a headquarters desk. That career had ended when Grant's commanding officer wearied of his orderly's constant imbibing, and demanded, "Why in thunderation must every clerk in the Army be a whiskey-swiller?"

"Sir, if it wasn't for whiskey," Alec Small had replied, "there'd be no clerks in the Army."

The next day, in reward for his humor, he had been given a chance to raise a crop of saddle corns....

Give a treacherous Apache implements and seeds, they told Alec Small, and he'll trade them for guns; but Alec didn't savvy that brand of hate talk . . .

NOW AND then, such a man could be found in the ranks. A misfit unsuited for barracks life or field duty. Since the Army was no antidote for the poisonous failures and troubles of civilian life, it was a mystery why the type joined up. However, Alec Small's past was no secret. He had come west as a young man, taken a schoolteaching job at the Red Rock Agency of the Ute Reservation in Colorado. After ten years among the more or less peaceful Utes, Alec had written a book, *Our Red Brethren*, which had been published in the East and given its author something of a reputation. In Washington, the Indian Bureau had sat up and taken

notice. Alec had been made Agent at Red Rock, but he had bumbled the job and at the end of six months his blundering had made him the laughing-stock of the West. The Red Brethren had been too much for him.

But if his past was well known, his reason for enlisting as a cavalryman was obscure. It may have been done on a day when he was suffering from a hang-over, for, after his failure as an Indian agent, Alec had taken to drink. But now, in the field, he tried hard enough.

It appeared that he wanted to be an honest-to-God trooper. But the saddle punished him, and horses gave him a touch of asthma. Desert sun and wind burned him lobster red. His earnestness, once the whiskey was sweated out of him, was the only soldierly thing about him. He tried so hard that Captain Hammond, after the heliostat message was decoded, sent him out on patrol with the civilian scout, Aubrey, and four other troopers under Second Lieutenant Macklin. As the patrol saddled up, some of B Troop's hardcased veterans joshed Alec by chanting their version of the Rogue's March:

"Poor little soldier
Poor little soldier,
Handed a gun and sent to hell
Because he couldn't soldier well!"

Alec's sunburned face showed a painful grin. A burly trooper yelled, "You aim to catch Orfano and his band by sprinkling ink on their tails, Smart Alec?"

The laughter rose in what seemed to Alec a suffocating wave. He could still hear it crashing against his ears ten minutes later, when the patrol rode away from B Troop's bivouac. He was that thin-skinned.

He had been laughed at a lot during the year since he had made that blunder at the Red Rock Agency. Yet it had been an honest mistake. He had believed he could make the Utes self-sufficent by training them in the ways of the white man, and his first step had been to make them into farmers. With Indian Bureau funds, he had purchased farming implements and seeds. He had hired several white farmers to teach the Utes, an when spring came the project was ready to start.

But the Utes, after a winter of being cared for by the Bureau, had other notions. They jumped the reservation—and took Alec's costly implements and seeds with them. They had headed into Arizona, traded the implements and seeds to the Apaches for guns and horses—and the Apaches had taken the farm stuff across the Border where Mexicans were glad to barter for such precious contraband...And the joke had been on Alec Small. His trusting schoolteacher's nature hadn't been able to cope with the sly Utes. He had been laughed at for believing that the tribesmen could learn to think and live in the manner of white men... when any real frontiersman knew that the only way to change an Indian's nature was with a rifle or a calvalry saber. And now Trooper Alec Small, on his first patrol, was apt to learn that the hard way.

THE PATROL headed deep into the rocky furnace of the Pinals, seven riders venturing into Apache country. The day grew long and hot and dusty, and the unmarked trail led through rockwalled fastnesses. Higher up were pinestudded slopes, but on the canyon floors there grew only cactus and catclaw and sparse forage grass. With Aubrey, the scout, riding ahead, the patrol probed and found nothing at all.

Lieutenant Macklin rode with Sergeant O'Mara, and next came Troopers Harmon and Schultz. Alec rode at the rear with the leathery-faced, tobacco-chewing Trooper McSwan, and finally asked, "Tim, who's this Orfano?"

"A damn' Apache," McSwan growled. "What'd you think?"

"I know he's an Apache," Alec replied, swallowing the rebuke. "But how is it he's never been heard of until now?"

"First time he turned 'bronc'," McSwan told him. "Until he jumped the reservation with this band, Orfano was a peaceful 'Pache. He worked around the San Carlos Agency as interpreter and handyman. He savvies

white man talk. According to Aubrey, Orfano is a young buck who's lived at the Reservation only a couple years. When he was a kid, three or four years old, some Mexicans found him after a fight between them and his people... For some loco reason, the Mexes kept the kid and named him *El Huerfano*—the Orphan. They were sheepherders, and they drifted into New Mexico. They turned him over to a rancher, so he grew up among white folks and got to be called Orfano." McSwan paused, spat a stream of tobacco juice at a yucca stalk. "Me, I'd bet my next month's pay—if I live to c o l l e c t it—that Orfano won't be caught. He's too smart to ride into a trap."

"We'll catch him, Tim."

"Listen who's talking!"

"We'll catch him," Alec went on, "just because he's learned to think like a white man. We'll know how his mind works. L i k e I said in my book—"

"You and your book," McSwan growled and spat now to show his contempt. "You know why he jumped the Reservation? Just because he never learned to think like the white folks who raised him. An Apache always turns bronc when he drinks *tiswin*. That 'Pache corn-beer is might powerful stuff."

"So Orfano and his band were drunk on *tiswin?*"

"So Aubrey says."

"Well, by now they'll be sobered up," Alec argued. "And Orfano will see he made a mistake. I figure we'll catch him—"

He broke off as Sergeant O'Mara looked back and growled, "Quiet, Small—Quiet!"

THE AFTERNOON wore slowly on, and the heat of hades lay like a weight upon the seven men of the patrol. Sunglare was reflected from cliffs and sandy ground, and made eyes ache. The men sucked at their canteens, and sweated out the moisture as fast as they drank. They saw no hostiles. They grew weary of peering at every pine clump and every jumbled maze of rock that might conceal Orfano's armed band.

But it seemed that they were alone in the world, and Alec had the eerie feeling that the patrol was cut off and lost from all other men. McSwan and some of the others softly cursed the unseen Apaches. But Alec felt neither fear nor hatred for the enemy, and it occurred to him that he had never seen an Indian laugh... Up ahead, now Aubrey was riding closer to the troopers.

By four in the afternoon, the little column halted. Aubrey had something on his mind and talked low-voiced to young Lieutenant Macklin. The scout was lanky, as dark as an Indian, while the officer, not long out of West Point, was thick of body and fair-skinned. Tim McSwan eased close to listen, then reported to Alec that Aubrey smelled smoke. "He figures," McSwan whispered, "that the Apaches are baking *mescal* somewhere not too far ahead." The scout was pointing toward a jagged mountain. "Thereabouts," he told Lieutenant Macklin.

The officer took out and studied a map, then wrote out a dispatch. He handed the paper to Sergeant O'Mara, and Alec, as O'Mara swung around, looked elsewhere. He didn't want to be picked as a courier; he wanted to see what lay ahead.

O'Mara said, "You, Harmon," and held out the dispatch.

Harmon swung to his mount and started along the back-trail, seeming glad to be gone. The remaining six pressed on through the rock-bound emptiness, Aubrey sniffing of the smoke none of the others smelled.

THERE IN a narrow defile, as the sun went down, the patrol came face to face with a part of the Apache band. Colt pistols and Army Springfields opened fire first, but Apache Winchesters roared a quick answer. It was more of a melee than a battle, with riders s t a m p e d i n g through roiled up dust and wafting powder smoke, and the din of it rose to a wild crescendo. During those few flaming minutes that seemed an eternity, time stood still for Alec Small. He heard and saw and smelled the fight, but somehow did not feel it. He was strangely numb, and if that was fear, it was not too bad.

Alec fought his plunging bay horse as hard as he fought to fire and reload and fire again his Springfield, and all the while he could see the lurid flashes, bright against the thickening dusk, of the quick-firing Winchesters.

When the firing ceased and the Apaches had vanished, Alec slipped from the saddle and stared at a sprawled heap among the rocks. It was a dead pinto pony, and pinned beneath it, by the legs, was a live Apache. Alec saw glittering black eyes in a squat dark face, drawn back lips and bared teeth. He saw the Indian's awkward attempt to bring his rifle to bear. Alec used his boot, hastily.

Trooper Schultz came running, cursing in his Bavarian German, lifting his carbine to smash the Apache's skull. Alec grasped Schultz's arm and swung him aside. "Don't," he yelled. "He's helpless."

"He's better dead—ya!" Schultz muttered. "Better for us."

He came on again with his carbine, and Alec stepped in front of him.

"Dammit, Schultz; he's my prisoner!"

Lieutenant Macklin came up, then Aubrey. They stared at the trapped Apache, and the officer muttered, "O'Mara's dead. We got only one—besides this bronc.

Aubrey was taking a fresh chew of tobacco. He said, "And this one's Orfano."

DARKNESS came suddenly, completely. The patrol moved back from the defile, into the broader canyon. There were five now, with O'Mara gone, and they took the prisoner with them. Midway through the inky canyon, Aubrey signalled a halt. Men held their horses, held their breaths, while the scout listened. There were no sounds in the night; at least, Alec Small heard nothing. But finally Aubrey said, no louder than a sigh, "They're all around us. We better fort up as best we can, Lieutenant—until Captain Hammond gets here."

A rifle cracked, and Aubrey sank down with only a wispy gasp. McSwan swore, and growled, "Who said Injuns don't fight at night?"

The hidden rifle cracked again, and an Army mount screamed horribly and fell in a thrashing heap. Macklin spoke an order, and the deciminated patrol flattened down behind boulders. Alec pulled Orfano down, and the Apache, speaking for the first time, said in English, "You four are dead men."

"Maybe so," Alec muttered. "But we're not afraid to die."

"You lie," Orfano grunted. "All white men fear death."

His arms were bound behind him, his injured legs must have tortured him, but he was calm in a fatalistic way. In his early twenties, Orfano was stockily built in the way of his people. He was naked to the waist, but he wore white man's jeans. His hair was cut as short as Alec's own, yet he wore the Apache-style red band about his head. To Alec Small's mind, Orfano was a strange admixture—a white man's mind in an Apache body. He was still certain that the Apache thought like a white man.

"What about you?" Alec asked. "Are you afraid of death, Orfano? "He wasn't a soldier when he spoke the question; he was the schoolteacher with the inquiring mind—the book-author seeking truth. "How do you feel about dying?"

"If I was afraid, soldier," Orfano told him, "I wouldn't be here."

"Why'd you do it?" Alec went on. "Why did you turn bronc?"

Orfano didn't answer that.

A sliver of a moon rose, and once, dimly limned, half a dozen half-naked warriors were glimpsed on a high rock shelf. There was an occasional movement about the canyon, a deliberate maneuver to draw the soldiers' fire. McSwan and Schultz grabbed at the bait, and a dozen Apache rifles opened up in reply. McSwan was hit in the head and died without a sound. Another horse was killed. Lieutenant Macklin cried out, hit in the left arm. Alec was all empty inside. He could not force himself to look at McSwan's slumped form. He had liked McSwan.

THE SNIPING kept up, and Schultz fired an occasional shot in

reply. Alec crawled back to his post and found Orfano in a sitting position, his back to a boulder. The Indian's face was as blank as a rock.

"No good in this," Alec said, with sudden anger. "Why'd you start it?"

Orfano was slow in answering. "Some of the young men drank too much *tiswin*. They talked of the old days.... Of Geronimo and Victorio and old Nana. Drink made their hearts bold and put fire into their minds." The Indian's voice grew guttural, but his words were clear—with a poetry woven through them.

"But you knew it was foolish, Orfano," Alec said. "You know there are too many soldiers."

"I knew," Orfano replied. "When they were gone, I got my pony and followed. I told them it was crazy, but they wouldn't listen. What could I do but ride with them? They stole horses from the ranches, true. But I kept them from raiding and killing. We fought a posse that tried to stop us, and tonight we fight because the soldiers fired first. The *tiswin* is gone from their bellies now, and they know it was a mistake. But they're afraid to give up."

"Afraid? Apaches afraid, Orfano?"

"Of being sent to Florida, like Geronimo and the others."

"But the longer they stay out, the more soldiers they kill," Alec muttered, "the worse it'll be for them. Maybe some will be hanged."

Orfano's voice lost its poetry, took on the harshness of anger. "I know all that, soldier," he said. "Another day—in two days, maybe—I could have led them back. But there are forty of them, full of the fear of prison, and now they'll have to be beaten. Many if them will die, along with many soldiers."

"If you had the chance, you could take them in?"

"I'm a prisoner, soldier."

"If I freed you, would you give me your word?"

Orfano's eyes seemed to glow." "You'd take an Apache's word?"

Alec said, "Yours, Orfano," then heard Lieutenant Macklin call softly, "Ready, Small....Schultz, fetch the horses." The officer was silent a moment. Then: "Get rid of the prisoner, Small. we can't take him with us."

Schultz grunted, "Ya; kill him. I'll finish him off." He came forward, crouching low, and Alec saw the brute look on his face—and the saber in his hand. "Damn you!" Alec flung at him. "Your orders are to get the horses. He's my prisoner, and I'll take care of him!"

Schultz cursed him but turned away, going deeper into the rocks for the horses. Alec crossed to Macklin, and gasped, "Sir, Orfano says he could take the band in. If you let him live and—"

"Enough of that, Small!" Macklin growled. "I know about that damn' fool book you wrote and how you tried out a crazy policy of putting Indians on their honor. I won't hear to any such nonsense. We can't take the prisoner with us, and he's too dangerous to turn loose. You'll obey orders—and do away with him!"

Alec swallowed and turned away. Schultz came up with three horses. Macklin got up with an effort, his face twisted from the pain from his shattered arm. He had trouble in mounting. The sniping increased, and a ring of rifle flashes revealed that the Apaches knew a break was to be made. Alec drew his saber and lay the point to Orfano's throat.

"Your word?"

"You have orders to kill me, soldier."

"I don't want to kill you," Alec said fiercely. "Give me your word that you'll try to take the band in, and I'll turn you loose!"

He knew that disobedience of orders was a soldier's greatest sin, yet he was still the man who believed that Indians could be won to the ways of the white man. He heard Lieutenant Macklin yell above the roar of Apache guns, "Small, come along!"

Then Orfano said, "I give you my word, soldier. But only because you are a white man who'll take an Apache's word."

Alec grabbed him, flung him down onto his face, and used the saber to cut away his bonds. He whirled and ran to the horse Schultz was holding for him.

Wild Apache cries rang out. The

darkness was ripped by spurts of powder flame. Alec saw Schultz and his mount go down. He saw Lieutenant Macklin hit again, but regain his balance and ride on. Alec felt a hammer blow at his left side....

BACK AT Camp Grant, days later, Trooper Alec Small and Lieutenant Macklin lay abed recovering from their wounds. Time was heavy on their hands, and in Alec's mind was a nagging guilt. There was no word of the bronc Apache band. B troop had come in to Grant with the two wounded men, and two other troopers had been sent out.

If more men died, Alec knew the blame would be upon his head. Should Orfano lead the band in other fights against the Army, Alec Small would have made an even greater mistake than that at Red Rock.

The post surgeon, Major Anders, came in. He said to Lieutenant Macklin, "Word just arrived from the San Carlos agency. Orfano's band came in last night. Funny, but those Apaches came in of their own accord."

A sign of relief escaped Alec Small. Major Anders stared at him. Lieutenant Macklin turned his head with an effort and looked across at Alec.

"You said they'd come in," Macklin said. "You told Captain Hammond that when we broke out of the trap and reached the troop. How...?"

Alec remembered. He had been full of pain and nearly unconscious at the time, and Captain Hammond and some others had laughed....Now he looked at Major Anders, and asked, "Sir, did Orfano himself come in?"

The surgeon shook his head, and Macklin said, "You forget, Small. Orfano's dead."

There was an odd look in the lieutenant's eyes. He knew. Alec looked away. But the guilt was gone from his mind. The risk he had taken with Orfano proved in part, at least to him and perhaps to Lieutenant Macklin, that an Indian could be reasoned with—and if there were men who still laughed about the Red Rock mistake, the laughter would no longer hurt. Alec went back to watching the lizard on the ceiling, and he was smiling ●END

DANTE FALOO

(*Cont'd from page* 46)

A faint gleam of the old fighting spirit came into the sheriff's eyes. "Oh I reckon I used a killer's name a bit free but look the good it brought us. Blow-hard Simpson near talked himself to death. At any rate, I'll bet he does his bleeding in a new town."

I tried to finish my supper, but I just didn't have any appetite.

"What's the matter, Steve?" Mr. Avery asked. "You worried 'bout something?"

I wasn't quite sure myself.

"I guess I wanted to meet Dante," I said at last. "I don't even know what he looks like."

Sheriff Tow squinted his eyes at me as he put a cigar in his mouth. "Sort of glad you didn't, Steve," he said as he bit off the end. "Three years in prison can change a man a lot. You might have been disappointed. Keep what ideas you have. They're probably pretty close. After all, a man with the name Dante Faloo should be what you imagine him."

I suppose that's right because now, whenever I think back—

Dante Faloo! I can just see him. ●END

PEACEMAKER MEANS POWDERSMOKE

(*Cont'd from page* 70)

I'm at it I guess I owe an apology for the things I've been saying about the Sheriff's office. All Joe Cowley needs is money enough to hire more deputies like Lee Kirk. Maybe something can be done about that, too!"

Kirk looked past the banker then, caught the sheriff's eye. Grinned a little, and saw Cowley grin back. Funny, he thought, how things can change all in a moment. How Del Brannon was square with the world, and the sheriff's problem settled.

It had only taken a second or two of nerve and gunflame to do all that! ●END

LAST OF THE LOBOS

The kid knew he was innocent, but the town knew he was a killer . . . .

by
RAY TOWNSEND

He was remembering the day he gunned down Derrant's two hired killers.

BILL BOWMAN stepped through the door quickly, pushing it shut against the driving rain outside. As his glance came up, his eyes widened slowly at the changed richness of the hotel lobby, the deep carpeting upon which he stood, and for the first time he became aware of his own seamy condition: of the battered Stetson he wore, the sodden, mud-caked boots, and the dripping, cracked wetness of the ancient slicker that covered his six-foot frame. But surprise was not done. Before he could snake out of the raincoat, the girl was there on the stairs, and behind her, shaken for the moment from his customary beaming smile of good will, stood Jack Griffith, tall and looking the part of a man who had made his gain.

For that one second there was something in the man's attitude that held Will where he was, against the door. But his own name was on the girl's lips then, in exclamation, and he was meeting the pair at the foot of the stairs, and the past two years were gone in the warmth of her greeting and the booming welcome of Griffith's deep voice.

They were going in to dine and as Will joined them he heard Griffith's casual tones at his shoulder only vaguely, his eyes renewing again his memories of this vivid, dark-haired girl before him, this Linda Taylor who had seemingly blossomed into

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full-blown maturity in the short time he'd been gone. Across the white linen of the table her beauty struck him anew in the low-shouldered gown she wore, and he was again conscious of his own rough clothing, the three-day growth of black beard along his jaw. He heard Griffith's laugh as his eyes went about the room.

"Been a lot of changes, Will," the big man said, "in the last two years. More than you see on the surface, here, too."

Will Bowman grinned wryly. "I guess you know I was counting on a few changes, Jack," he said.

And again, fleetingly, Will saw the man's seriousness. "There may be a few things you won't like."

A frown started between Will's eyes, but the girl's hand came across to his own as she spoke.

"Lou Durant didn't die, Will. He's still in town."

"Didn't die?" Question was there in his mind then, and he was remembering another day like the one outside now, when he'd faced Lou Durant and two of his lean-eyed gunmen and had seen them all spread their length in the mud before he'd ridden from the town. "But that means..."

"That you're not wanted by the law, Will." The girl's eyes were shining. "You'll have no charges to face. The other two men were wanted for murder and robbery. We thought you'd hear, thought you'd be back before this."

The two years were there, the thirty-a-m o n t h-and, the purposeless, shifting, marking-of-time.

Jack Griffith coughed. "Some of the rest is not so good, Will," he said slowly. "The ranch, for instance..."

THE RANCH. Now it was here, the look, the calculation he had seen in the man's face there on the stair. "What about the ranch, Jack?" Will's voice was drawn.

"Well, the way things stand right now, I don't think it'd be wise to turn it over to you again." The man's eyes were on the fork in his hand. "Not right away, that is."

Here it was, then. It was like this. Anger and sudden suspicion brought color up beneath Will's face. "You're not forgetting who's who around here are you, Jack?" he asked quietly.

"Please, Will." The girl's eyes were round. "It's Lou. He's still got that note of your father's." Will noticed that she no longer referred to the dead man as "Dad," as she always had since old Ben had adopted her, years before. "You know he can legally attach anything that's in your name as long as he has that note."

"Legally!" Will Bowman snorted.

"Legally," Jack Griffith repeated. "The word means a lot more than it used to around Junction City, Will." His voice lowered. "Look around, for instance. Notice who's come in since we have?"

And Will was noticing then, seeing old Ezra Winthrop and his wife at a corner table, Sim Tully and his, Bert Johnson, Tack Lewis and Reed Holbrook about the dining room. These men were all farmers, nesters, from the bottoms along the San Juanitos. And in the cattle country that this had been, Will never remembered seeing one of these men in the dining room of the Union Hotel—even before this new note of prosperity had blossomed out. The Union had always been cattlemen's headquarters and bare board tables had seemed good enough then. He frowned at Griffith.

"Things kind of grew up while you were gone, Will." The man expanded as though Junction City's new look of prosperity and civilization had been of his doing alone. "And the people have changed accordingly. You won't find one man out of ten carrying a gun any more." Will was conscious of the weight of the forty-four he'd hitched back as he sat down. "Yes sir, since the railroad's come through and the cattlemen and nesters decided to give each other a break and let the law handle their disputes like sensible men instead of gun-crazy fools, the San Juan Valley's become a pretty respectable place to live."

WILL FELT a n n o y a n c e run through him. "I kind of had the idea that's what I was aiming for when Lou Durant forced my hand

that day in the street, Jack," he said slowly.

"Of course it was, Will." Linda Taylor shot a quick glance at Griffith.

"But you say Durant's still around." He was scowling now, feeling his own rudeness before the girl, but demanding to know. "Does your new civilization include harboring skunks and Land Office coyotes as pets? Or do you dress 'em up so they look like Chihuahuas?"

He saw the blood come up beneath the man's full features, and again the suspicion was there, strong and wondering.

"Please, Will." The girl's hand was on his upon the cloth. "After all, it's not Jack's fault Lou is still in Junction City. Lou Durant was fired from the Land Office job he had, for hiring gunmen to run the cattlemen off the Company land he was selling to the farmers. The main office didn't like his methods. In fact, after the wound you gave him healed, he stood trial for some of the shootings that had taken place earlier..."

"Dad's, I suppose." Will Bowman was getting it all now, and the more he heard, he realized, the less he liked. He spoke harshly, disregarding the girl. "And they let him go and gave him a nice, shiny medal for clearing the country of gun-crazy fools who thought they had a right to their own land!" It was the same old bitterness, but he couldn't help it when he thought of Lou Durant. "And what are you going to do with me in your new civilization, Jack? Give me a nice new chihuahua coat to hide my sins and turn me out to graze on a thirty-a-month job on my own ranch? Is that it, Jack?"

"Will!" The girl straightened in her chair.

But Will Bowman would not let go. "I signed the Bar Bench over to you, Jack, because Durant was pushing that phoney note he got the old man to sign. Then after the shooting, when I had to leave town, I left it in your name because I thought you were my best friend! Now I see I was wrong about having to leave the country. Was I wrong about the rest too, Jack?"

But there was soft movement beyond Will's shoulder, and as he looked around Lou Durant was there, smiling, distinguished in black, the huge diamond in his cravat sparkling beneath the chandelier that was lit against the rain-darkened day outside. And as he met the man's glance he saw mockery of the anger he knew to be in his own eyes.

"Will," The man's recognition was precise, like the rest of him. Too precise. "And Miss Taylor. Congratulations, Jack. You're a lucky man."

Durant's bow was more of a suggestion than reality, but Will Bowman was no longer seeing the man and his slow smile and precisely waving, dark hair that was turning so exactly grey at the temples. Congratulations! The word had riveted Will to his chair. He'd been a fool! A blamed, blithering idiotic fool to think...But what in the devil had he thought, anyway? And now, when he could trust himself to look, he saw the ring there on her finger, his eyes travelling slowly to her face, meeting the half-afraid, half-smiling look of her and seeing her glance away to the man who was supposedly his own best friend, to Jack Griffith across the table.

"Sorry if I've interrupted something private." Durant's voice was laughing at Will Bowman, there in his ear. "But drop by my place—I've got the Valley Star Saloon now, Will. I think we've got a few things to talk over."

He was gone then, to a table against the far wall, and Will was coming to his feet as Jack Griffith arose. Griffith was removing Linda Taylor's chair and Will met the girl's eyes as she came around on his side, her hand grasping his arm as she looked up at him.

"I thought you'd see the ring, Will," she said, uncertainly. "I was waiting for you to say something."

"Yes. Of course." Will's face felt dry, cracked, as he tried to smile. "Congratulations. Both of you. Congratulations, Jack."

Griffith's expansion came again. His smile was generous. "Come out to the ranch tomorrow or next day, Will," he said. "I'll get things in or-

der and show you what I've been doing with the place."

THEY WERE gone then, leaving him at the table, moving graciously, nodding to men who had been his father's enemies as they approached the carpeted stairway. Will crossed through the lobby in hurried strides, slamming the glass-paneled door behind him and facing into the chill blast of the rain before he remembered the worn slicker he'd left inside.

He had no place to go, and as he stepped off the newly laid brick walk into the mud of the street he remembered he'd intended getting some money when he saw Griffith. He was dead broke and for a moment he stopped there in the street in the mud and driving rain. He laughed then, a short, deliberate laugh that was without humor. He saw the livery stable sign further down and turned in that direction, the sound of his footsteps coming in sharp, sucking cadence as he walked.

Morning was but a continuation of the former day's sodden, grey wetness. At the stable, little Vince Johnson said nothing about his sleeping in the loft of the building, his sharp eyes flickering once at the gun on Will's thigh and going away as though he'd seen nothing. And Murphy too, in the hash-house he owned, had let his glance run along down the counter after one brief look. Will was half-way through the eggs and ham when Matt Gorman came in and let his weight down on the stool beside him and when he saw that even Lou Durant's closest henchman was unarmed, he laughed abruptly and jerked his head at the balding man behind the counter.

"Hey, Murph, better set out a cup of tea for the company." But the thing was getting under his skin and as neither man laughed he realized it suddenly, pulling down on the resentment that was building inside, turning back to the meal before him.

"You're right, Will," the big red haired man said slowly. "Things've changed more than somewhat." He signaled for coffee. "But you'll probably find out before long that there's other ways to skin a cat than by shooting his hide off with forty-four slugs."

Will's glance pinned the man's face. "You're the second man to tell me that since I hit town, Matt. But from the other side of the fence. It couldn't be that I've got myself a rep, could it?" There was sudden challenge in his tone. "Or is it somebody's advantage that I..." He broke off as the possibility of the thought occurred. "Durant send you?" he demanded.

Gorman's glance was steady in the rough squareness of his face. "Lou said if I saw you to tell you he'd like a few words with you. Guess he kind of expected you to drop by the Star last night. That's all, Will." The man paused a moment, deliberately. "Except that if I was you, I'd take my two-bit's worth when they give it to me, and keep right on riding. There's been a new hand dealt around, Will, and I don't think there's any chairs open for an hombre that fills his straights with lead!"

HE THOUGHT about the man's words as he knocked on the door of Durant's room. He was a crazy fool, he told himself harshly, to even see Durant. But his curiosity was up and resentment had flared almost to anger when he'd met Rufe Williams and Ben Dawson on the street and the two ranchers had given him but a brief nod as they'd passed. Damn it all, they'd been shoulder to shoulder with him and his old man in the fight against the Land Company! In fact, it had been as much for them as for himself that he'd been forced into facing Durant and his two gunnies, that day! The very shooting that seemed to be outlawing him now had climaxed the difficulties between them and the nesters and Land Company under Durant!

He'd been about to knock again when the door opened on Lou Durant's smiling face. And still the mockery was there in the man's eyes as he read the anger in Will.

"Come in. Come in, Will. Glad you dropped around." The man's courtesy was a goad. "You know Judge Maxwell." Maxwell was in a straight-

backed chair, a straight-backed man, upright and prim, white haired in his sixties. "I thought we might have a little something in common we might talk over, now you're back, Will."

"I figured maybe you'd be too damned respectable to talk to a two-bit gunny, Durant." Anger was there beneath the lightness of Will's tone.

"Not two-bit, Will. I still have a leaden bullet in my hide that I value at considerably more than two-bits."

Will's eyes worked on the man's features as he crossed the expensively furnished room, but he knew he'd learn nothing until Durant was ready to talk. And again he asked himself why he was here, but the memory of Linda and Jack Griffith, the suspicion of the man who had been his friend was there, gnawing at the confidence he'd once had in them both.

"Let's get down to cases, Lou," he said then. "There's more going on around here than meets the eye and I've got a notion some of it stinks higher than your methods always did!"

Durant raised an eyebrow as he let himself into a large chair beside glass-panelled bookshelves. "Judge Maxwell said I was being foolish to talk to you in the first place, Will. Don't make me agree with him."

"Listen, Durant! I don't give a hang who you agree with, understand? I put one bullet through that rotten hide of yours once before and it'd pleasure me plumb well to put another one a little closer to taw, if I ever got half an excuse, savvy? You had my old man shot, if you didn't do it yourself, and there's no crawling pussyfooting ways or 'new civilization' that can erase it!"

"The law doesn't quite agree with you, Will." The man's smile was still there.

Judge Maxwell cleared his throat abruptly, his eyes cold glints in the hollowness of his features. "See here, young man. Mr. Durant stood trial for various things nearly two years ago. He was acquitted. Now, there'll be no more talk about killing. And another thing: you yourself have a quite unsavory reputation here in Junction City and if you are ever hailed before the bar in my court, I promise you things will not go easy. Now, this matter of the note, Mr. Durant."

In spite of himself, Will's eyes widened upon the old man's features. *He* had quite a reputation! But, my Gosh, it was Durant... He had to jam control against the exasperation of his feelings, knowing he could do himself no good until he at least knew the lay of the land. It may just be, he had to warn himself viciously, that he could find out more from Durant than even Jack Griffith could tell him.

"Yes, the note." Lou Durant was a cat, preening. "It was a pretty clever move to sign the Bar Bench over to Griffith at the time, Will. It stopped me cold, as far as things went, then."

"That note's not worth the paper it's written on, Durant! You know that."

"Yes, I thought you'd take that attitude. You see, that's why I've asked Judge Maxwell to be here this morning. I just wanted to get this little thing straight in your mind, Will. In case you get any ideas, you know. You'll know just how far you can jump, legally."

"Which is not very far, young man." Maxwell's eyes bored. "Mr. Durant has already filed suit and the case is pending. The matter can be brought before me at any time and upon the face of the evidence already to be seen, I would immediately grant Mr. Durant judgment against you, payable in any worldly goods you, might possess, to the full amount of said note!"

"Twenty thousand dollars, Will!" Durant smiled. "You don't happen to have the amount on you, do you?"

It was in Will to flame out, to throw the words back in their faces. It was his father's signature on the note. He knew that. But he knew too that the signature had been obtained at the point of a gun—and worse. He remembered again the raised blisters on the soles of his father's feet when he'd found the body in the line shanty on the upper San Juanitos. But what was the use? Nothing would be gained by his flying off the handle. Not at a time like this, with Maxwell

sitting there in his chair like the avenging angel of destruction.

"Here." Durant had reached into a vest pocket and come out with a folded paper which he extended to Will. "Here's the note, Will. That is your father's signature, isn't it?"

He had the paper then, stepping back suddenly, automatically. And as apprehension showed in Durant's face, as the man moved in his chair, Will's gun was in his hand, centering the man as he backed away.

"You don't need this note, Durant," he was saying then. "Dad built the Bar Bench and when I got big enough, I helped him. You don't think I'd let a phony piece of paper rob me of my life, do you?" He was laughing then, inside, it had been so easy.

But, somehow, Lou Durant was laughing too, in soft, casual sounds of genuine humor. The man nodded slightly and there was the abrupt hard roundness of gun-barrel against Will's spine, and Matt Gorman's voice at his ear: "Gentle, boy, gentle."

Yes, it was easy, all right. Too easy. And not all the bitterness that was in Will could dispel how easy he'd been.

"You see, Judge," Durant said casually, "just as I said it would be. I'm sorry I had to carry this through, Will, but I wanted to make my point with Judge Maxwell, here."

The old man's features had relaxed almost to smiling, but sternness came immediately as he stabbed the sharpness of his glance at Will.

"Attempted robbery with a deadly weapon! This alone could mean years in prison for you, young man!" His glance went to Durant and came back. "But seeing's Mr. Durant more or less planned things to prove his point, this incident won't be pressed." He paused to emphasize his words. "Unless I hear from Mr. Durant later! You'd better remember that, young man!" The gaunt man picked up his hat then and, nodding briefly to Durant, moved to the door and was gone.

"My, my!" Gorman's laugh came. "Ain't you the bad boy, Will!"

"Shut up, Matt!" Durant's voice was suddenly serious. "I'm sorry I had to pull that, Will. But that paper itself doesn't mean a thing any more. It's recorded and registered with the county recorder, so even if you got away with it, it wouldn't make any difference. What I really wanted to do was to show you how things stand. Now it may look rough at first sight, but I've got an idea or two that may strike you with a little different flavor. I've got a deal, in other words, Will. How about it?"

Will had control of himself, but the hatred he felt was an underlaid deepness beneath the move of his voice.

"You're a foxy man, Mister Durant," he said slowly. "But I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you fox yourself straight into a pine box before this game is through!"

Durant sighed. "I was afraid you'd take it like that, this early, Will. You want to see Jack Griffith. Is that it? Sure, I'll give you time. Go see Jack. You've got a right to see the rest of your cards before you make your bet."

Looking at the man, the urge to throttle his sleek sureness was there in Will. But there was nothing he could do and he turned past Gorman to the door. Matt's voice was there as he went into the hall, feeding Will's anger and the ugly run of his own suspicion.

"You'll be back, mister boy. You'll be back."

"SURE, YOU'VE done all right, Jack. In fact, you've probably done a better job with the ranch than I would've done myself! But, damn it all, man, why all this beating around the bush? We've known each other a long time! Let's have it, Jack! What's wrong?"

"To tell you the truth, Will, I was afraid you'd take it like this."

"Take it like this?" Will stared at the man. "Like what, man? It is out of line for a man to want to own, to take over, to possess the ranch he's worked for all his life? The old man and I built the Bar Bench, Jack! It's my ranch! What do you think I've been thinking, these last two years? Been dreaming of? Tramping around the country like a loose-livered saddle bum!— The Bar Bench, man! To look at the land, the stock, the ranch;

to know I built it and I own it! To meet other men and see that knowledge in them! To know... Oh, for—" He cursed abruptly, bitterly, and turned away.

Jack Griffith crossed the room, pouring whiskey from a decanter that stood on a heavy, oaken side-board. He offered Will a glass, and even that simple motion, so unintentionally possessive, added fuel to the flame of Will's resentment.

"You ought to take it easy a few days, Will. A good, soft mattress and some of Wong's special cooking. And spend some time in the saddle, looking the place over again; kind of get the hang of things. We'll figure something on that note of Lou's. Have him out to dinner and talk the thing over one night this week."

"We'll figure it out now, Jack! And as long as I draw breath, Lou Durant will never step foot on the Bar Bench!

"I own the Bar Bench, Jack!" He whispered the words at the man. "And don't you ever forget it!"

THEY STOOD that way a long moment, eyes clashing. But Jack Griffith was the first to bend. It is not man's way to face the lobo empty-handed and alone. "All right, Will." Griffith's face was wooden as he turned again to the desk.

The big man set his glass beside the ledgers he'd shown Will Bowman and, taking a key from his pocket unlocked a small drawer beside the open-faced pigeon holes. He brought out a long, legal-looking fold of paper and handed it to Will.

"You won't like what you see there, Will," he said. "But you asked for it and there it is!"

Will scanned the paper swiftly, slowing as his lean features twisted in disbelief. As he finished the page of legal print his eyes raised to the man who had been his friend, the paper crumpling, unfelt, in the tightening ball of his fist.

"I—I said you wouldn't like it, Will, but you've got to remember the circumstances..." Confidence had suddenly deserted the older man and for the first time Will Bowman was seeing the avarice, the shifting, furtive greed that crawled like a thing unclean through the desires and ambition of Jack Griffith.

"Circumstances?" Will echoed the word savagely. "I remember a hell of a lot more than that, Jack! But I don't remember anything that says you can't kill a thieving coyote when you catch him!"

For the space of a second Jack Griffith stood before the flaming anger in Will's eyes, color burning beneath his own features with the whip of the insult. He moved then, his hand coming up from a desk drawer with the menacing ugliness of a derringer. Will stepped in as he saw the gleam of metal in the man's hand, almost glad for the excuse, putting his shoulder behind the blow and feeling the satisfaction as his fist connected high on Griffith's jaw. Following, he hit the man again, savagely, and a third time as Griffith fell, crashing against the solid wall.

"If you move another step, Will, I'l shoot!"

Turning, Will saw the girl in the door, her eyes round above the levelled deadliness of a forty-five. Her voice held the quaver of excitement, but there was control, too, that held Will there above the fallen man.

"What did you think you'd find after two years, Will?" she demanded quietly. "Did you expect Jack to build the ranch to twice its former worth and settle all the differences between the ranchers and farmers and then just step aside and hand the whole thing to you on a silver platter? Did you think you could ride back with a gun on your hip and find everybody kow-towing to your mighty lordliness? Jack told me how you'd be, Will Bowman, but I didn't believe him. He said a third of the Bar Bench wouldn't be enough for you."

"A third?" He echoed the words, not understanding. And then he saw it. She didn't know. Griffith hadn't told her. He looked down, seeing as though for the first time that the paper was still crumpled in his fist.

But there was the sound of hoof-beats slowing in the yard outside and the man on the floor stirred and came awake.

"Your friends are dropping in for a little visit, Griffith," he said. "We'll be listening from the hall. There'll be a gun on your back every minute, so if I were you I'd make it pretty. Come on, Linda, we can..."

"No, Will." And as he turned to face the girl he saw that the gun was still in her hand, still covering him determinedly. "You've got to understand that things are different now. You can't order people around like cattle, Will. That's what causes all the fighting and killing in the first place. It caused your father's death and if you start it all over it would cause a lot more. Jack doubled the value of the Bar Bench and he's entitled to a third interest. Dad wanted me to have a share, you know that. That leaves a third for you, Will. You've got to be fair. You—I thought you'd be different, Will, but I—"

"Give me that gun!" Will knew the girl didn't understand, didn't know the true state of things.

"I'll shoot before I'll let you stir up trouble in the valley again!"

But he came on and as he reached abruptly for the gun it exploded beneath the pressure of her finger. Will froze in mid-stride, shocked by the blast of flaming powder, the searing, branding finger of leaden bullet that grazed his ribs. He was standing that way, unbelieving, when the front door opened and men burst into the room.

Lou Durant was there, and Ben Dawson of the Double D spread, and coming in behind, the broad grinning figure of Matt Gorman. There was the sound of other men from the porch outside. "There he is!" Durant's voice came. "Get him, Matt!"

But as Will stood there, half-blinded by the acrid fumes of powder smoke, the girl was suddenly there against him, sobbing, crying words, her arms about him in sudden fear and hysterical realization of what she'd done.

"Hold up, there!" Ben Dawson batted a heavy hand against the gun that was coming up in Matt Gorman's fist. "I've got him covered! Don't move, Bowman!"

BUT WILL Bowman had no intention of moving, hearing the girl's mumbled words against his chest, realizing with a quick upsurge of spirit the depth of the emotion that had brought her to him.

"There won't be any trouble, Miss Taylor." Dawson's deep voice boomed. "When this hombre's been tried and hung for killing Rufe Williams today, everything will be plumb peaceful!"

Will came away from the girl then, hearing her exclamation at the rancher's words, turning to face the men.

"Don't worry about my hanging, Dawson," he said. "I've been here at the ranch since early this morning. I couldn't have killed Williams. But, to tell you the truth, I'm not surprised at being accused of it. Or anything else that would get rid of me pronto. Here, look this over, Ben. It might give you an idea of the way things stand." Will straightened the crumpled paper he held, holding it out to the man.

There was the clink of glass as Jack Griffith poured himself a drink. The old rancher took the paper, holding it a moment as he squinted across at Griffith. "That right, Jack?" he demanded. "Bowman been here all day?"

"Of course it's right!" Linda's eyes flashed defiantly.

Griffith hesitated a long moment before speaking, avoiding the glances of Will and the girl. "Will got here an hour ago," he said slowly, and there was hatred in the quick glance he gave Will as Linda's gasp of disbelief came.

"You can't believe what the girl says, Ben," Durant said quickly. "You saw how things were a minute ago. I'll have a look at that paper."

But old Ben Dawson was shaking his head slowly as Durant casually took the paper from his hand. "Now just a minute here..."

But Will started forward as he saw Durant reach for the paper. "Don't let him have that, Ben!"

"Ease off, hombre!" Durant's smile was there as Matt Gorman moved up beside him, sixgun centering Will's middle. "Blast him if he moves another inch, Matt!" The man's easy glance touched Ben Dawson. "Why, this's nothing but the

Bar Bench deed Bowman signed over to Griffith two years ago, Ben, in order to get out of the responsibility for his father's debts."

But watching the man as he casually folded the printed form, Will saw the glint of a new anger there in his eyes, the threatening quality of the quick glance Lou Durant gave Jack Griffith. And too, the fact that Durant had lied about the contents of the paper in his hand brought a quickening of hope to Will.

"Do you know why Williams was killed, Ben?" he asked hurriedly. "Maybe he found out something of what's really written there on that paper Lou's got! Something about Jack Griffith signing over fifty per cent of the Bar Bench, and all lands and stock acquired by Bar Bench, in exchange for a guarantee that Durant would continue to make it impossible for me to claim ownership!"

"That's a damned lie!" The glass dropped from Griffith's hand, shattering as men's glances came around.

"All lands and stock to be acquired, Ben!" Will insisted now. "You haven't been missing any stock have you? Maybe Williams was! But you wouldn't think of looking up on the north benches, would you, on Bar Bench Land? Maybe Williams did! Maybe he found—"

"Here, let me see that paper, Lou!" Old Ben Dawson swung on Durant suddenly.

"He's lying!" Durant's smile narrowed. "I told you what was on the paper, Dawson! You'd better take my word!"

"Who's been pushing the fact that I'm a gunny, a troublemaker, Ben?" Will worked on the old rancher's suspicion. "And why shouldn't they? The Bar Bench is a nice fat golden goose, Ben! Especially when they could work on their neighbor's stock without suspicion and maybe even blame old man Bowman's kid for doing it to get even! That's enough to kill for, Ben!" Will's eyes were sparkling. "Did you kill Williams, Matt, just to get me hung, or did he catch you red-handed running some of his beef onto Bench land?"

"No! Jack!" Will had them on edge, but they all swung as the girl cried out. Jack Griffith's face was twisted with hatred as he came up with the derringer. The small gun barked from his hand just as the girl stepped into the line of fire, hands outthrust to stop him. Will saw her lithe body jerk with the impact and his own gun was up then and flaming and the hatred on Griffith's full features was sudden agony as he doubled, clawing wildly at his middle.

"Get him, Matt!" Durant's voice was in the room against Ben Dawson's deep protest. The bullet took Will high in the shoulder as he threw himself down, his own gun coming around to slam leaden death across the room. There was a gun in Durant's hand, but Ben Dawson's weapon flamed in unison with Will's and the carefully dressed man crumbled under the combined fire, falling heavily across the body of Matt Gorman on the floor.

WILL BOWMAN looked up reluctantly from the girl sitting upright in the bed as Ben Dawson came into the room.

"Well," he boomed, "just thought I'd drop by to see if everything was peaceful-like on the Bench this morning. Like to see you after awhile about cutting some of that Double D stock out of those north draws, Will." The old-timer hesitated a moment, as though embarrassed. "Just wanted you to know," he said finally, "that I figure maybe sometimes we can pay too big a price for peace and quiet. I knew what kind of a coyote Lou Durant was, two years back. So did Rufe. Guess we was gettin' a little tired of the battle, though, and figured we'd rather settle with things half finished than go on. Maybe if we'd settled his hash for good at the time, a good man like Jack wouldn't have gone wrong."

When he'd gone, Will's glance came back to the girl's shining eyes. And what he saw there, he knew, was no compromise, but complete fulfillment, and the peace and the quiet were as whole and as real as the tenderness of the kiss she offered.

● END

SATAN'S SEGUNDO

A blazing gunbattle exploded in a burst of fury.

Into that outpost of hell plunged bush-whacking Flash Hayden —to throw up a bullet barrier around a defenseless tenderfoot's dark-eyed bride . . . .

by GUNNISON STEELE

MOUNTED on a powerful steeldust gelding, his saddlebags bulging with loot taken from the gutted Jacktown bank, Flash Hayden rode recklessly toward the Thundergust hills. A grin of contempt for the enraged posse that roared on his backtrail curled the gaunt, red-haired renegade's thin lips. Thoughts of the bank cashier he'd killed an hour ago squirmed through his brain.

For Flash Hayden was a man of adverse natures—a man of sudden fierce passions that were apt to spawn some act of kindness, or deed of brutish cruelty. It had been said of Flash Hayden that he once gave a widow a thousand dollars to pay off a mortgage, and that same night killed his best friend in a quarrel over a quart of whiskey! Satan's Segundo, some prairie wit had branded him, and the sobriquet was apt.

A strange, quiet man, pantherish despite his great size and strength. His eyes were yellow as a cougar's, his hawkish features marred by a livid knife scar from ear to chin. In all his perverse make-up Flash Hay-

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den probably had but one redeeming quality—his unswerving respect for a good woman.

Hayden didn't look back as he rode across the plain. He knew he had outdistanced the law-posse that had snarled quickly on his trail. He knew he could find safety in the rough Thundergust hills if he could reach them.

The red sun was lowering toward those jutting blue hills. The big gelding ran easily, but the fast pace had tired him. The hills were yet forty miles away. But Flash Hayden knew a place on the edge of the foothills that jutted out many miles from the highlands, where he could rest for a while and get a fresh mount if he wanted it—for a price.

A few miles ahead was Seth Tarn's whiskey station. Tarn was supposed to be a rancher, but his place was really an outlaw hideout. His big log ranchhouse afforded a bar, a place to eat and sleep for those who came his way. Those customers were almost invariably those fastriding, quick-shooting hombres who rode the gun-trails, men who paid Seth Tarn's murderous prices for his protection and vile whiskey, and rode away to curse his memory. To Tarn's place came wanted men, murderers, thieves—desperate, black-souled men who lived like wolves by the savage law of gun and claw and fang.

And to Seth Tarn's place this night, a blood-hungry posse raging on his backtrail, came Flash Hayden.

Darkness had slid down like a velvet curtain, and a chill wind was snaking among the foothills, when the big outlaw reached Tarn's place. Clutching a money-filled buckskin bag in one hand, Flash Hayden stalked into the wide front room of the big log structure. A kerosene lamp swinging from the ceiling illumined the room, which had been made into a combination bar, gambling den and dining room. At one end was a high wooden bar. Tables dotted the room.

FLASH HAYDEN paused just inside the doorway, his tawny eyes sweeping the room. Seth Tarn, a squat, hooknosed man with phlegmatic black eyes and a bristly black beard, stood behind the bar. Four other men men besides Tarn were in the room. The four, all gunbelted, evil-faced gents, sat playing stud poker at one of the tables.

Ignoring the four, who appraised him with cold, suspicious eyes, Flash Hayden strode to the bar. Seth Tarn grinned and licked his thick lips, as he looked at Flash Hayden, and something that might have been hate or fear crawled in his dull eyes. And Seth Tarn both hated and feared Flash Hayden.

"If it ain't Flash Hayden," Tarn said loudly. "How, Flash?"

"A bottle of whiskey," Flash Hayden clipped shortly. "Then somethin' to eat."

Tarn looked slyly at the bulging bag. "Sure, Flash. But no need to hurry. You're safe here."

"Whiskey!" Hayden said harshly. Seth Tarn sloshed whiskey into a dirty glass from a jug. Flash Hayden downed the fiery liquid at a quick, fierce gulp.

"Somethin' to eat—and I'm in a hurry!"

Aware of a peculiar silence and tension in the room, Flash Hayden turned slowly back to the bar. The four men at the table sat fingering their cards, staring with greedy, calculating eyes at Flash Hayden and the stuffed money sack.

Flash Hayden shrugged contemptuously, turned deliberately and strode to another table and sat down. He knew these four, and they knew and respected him. The lithe, dark-faced, flashily dressed hombre was Nick Scarlett, leader of one of the toughest outlaw gangs west of the Missouri. Nick Scarlett's clothes were jaunty and flashy, but he was deadly as a mad puma. His three followers were less showy, but just as deadly.

Nick Scarlett was proud of his dark handsomeness. And that was why he hated Flash Hayden so fiercely. Once Nick Scarlett and Flash Hayden had clashed. On that occasion, Flash Hayden had taken the swaggering killer's guns away from him, given him a savage beating with his fists. Then, deliberately, Flash Hayden had slashed a trench across Scarlett's dark face with a keenbladed knife, leaving a

livid scar that he would carry to his grave.

Impatiently, Flash Hayden waited for Tarn to bring the food. He was aware of the hate in Nick Scarlett's inky eyes, of the greed in the eyes of the other ruffians as they looked at the bulging bag. But that worried him little. He knew that the posse would be clinging grimly to his trail, bent on earning the huge bounty that his capture meant. Flash cursed Seth Tarn's slowness, knowing that he should be riding on toward the rough Thundergust hills.

The front door of the barroom opened into a wide hallway. Flash Hayden sat facing this door, so he saw the two as they entered. Swift amazement struck at Flash Hayden, but his cold, hawkish features remained expressionless.

A boy and a girl. The young fellow couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. He was dressed in silk shirt wide-brimmed white hat and shiny boots. The girl, younger even than the boy, was dressed in corduroy trousers and jacket. She was slim, dark-haired, pretty

The boy smiled reassuringly at her. Then they crossed the room to the table that was nearest Nick Scarlett and his raiders and seated themselves. The boy motioned to Seth Tarn.

Questions beat at Flash Hayden's brain. What were these two doing here, of all places, in Seth Tarn's hell-hole? City was stamped plainly on the tall, dudishly dressed youth. Quite obviously, he was new to the range country. The girl was pretty, unspoiled, with restless fear in her innocent eyes.

Flash Hayden shrugged, turned his eyes away. It was no affair of his. He had no time to worry about other folks, even if one of them was a slim, darkhaired girl.

Seth Tarn brought food, and placed it with a smirking grin on the table before Flash Hayden. Then he waddled like a black spider over to the table where the boy and girl sat. Flash saw him stare with open, leering admiration at the girl—saw the girl shrink away from him, instinctive revulsion in her young eyes.

A THIN THREAD of anger ran through Flash Hayden, a quick impulse to kill Seth Tarn for his insolence. But he thrust the impulse aside, and started eating. From the tail of his eye he watched as Tarn swaggered into a back room and returned with food, which he placed before the boy and girl.

The girl ate with lowered eyes, obviously aware of the bold stares of Nick Scarlett and his henchmen. Flash Hayden ate slowly, deliberately waiting. Several times, as the flirtation attempts of Nick Scarlett and his cut-throats grew more open, the girl glanced with frightened, bewildered eyes across at the gaunt, redhaired gunman. But, each time, Flash Hayden looked away, pretending not to notice.

He had no time, Flash Hayden told himself, to become mixed in a brawl over a couple of fool kids who should have had more sense than to be here in the first place. The hills were yet twenty miles away, and the lawdogs were closing in. He was a fool for staying even this long.

But he lingered over his food, watching. Flash Hayden was a *malo hombre*, a killer several times over. But the evil in his barbaric heart had never crowded out his reverence for a good woman nor his love for fair play. It was his one iron creed.

And into the game against this smoothfaced youth and the slim, redlipped girl had been slicked a stacked deck. Nick Scarlett and his gang had been waiting for their appearance when Flash arrived. The fates of these two youngsters, Flash knew, had already been decided...

Flash Hayden's eyes chilled suddenly. Nick Scarlett had got to his feet. Had gone over and, after a sweeping bow, seated himself at the table with the boy and girl. He was speaking, too softly for Flash to hear his words, a smirking grin on his dark, cruel features.

Flash Hayden saw the sudden alarm that leaped into the eyes of the two, saw them look quickly at him, and knew what Nick Scarlett had been saying. The big renegade smiled sardonically. Now that the girl knew what he was, maybe she would turn

her pleading eyes toward him no more. She would choose what she considered the lesser of the two evils —Nick Scarlett!

But she didn't. As Scarlett continued to speak softly, the resentful flush left the boy's face, and several times he laughed loudly at something the dudish outlaw leader had said. But the girl's natural intuition saw deeper than the boy's eyes. The fear deepened to terror in her eyes. From time to time, as Nick Scarlett talked and ogled her boldly, she turned her dark eyes toward Flash Hayden.

Flash Hayden grinned raggedly. Satan's Segundo, they'd called him, and with good reason. A man who had no friends, nor wanted any. A hard, mean gent who had killed more times than he remembered.

And now he sat like a stubbron jackass, because a crooked deck had been slipped into the game against a cleareyed girl!

A wave of self-derision swept through him. But he couldn't still the warring emotions in his heart.

Flash Hayden rose suddenly to his feet, seized the money bag from the table and stalked bitter-eyed to the bar. Seth Tarn, watching with his snake-dull eyes, reached eagerly for the whiskey jug. But Flash Hayden shook his tawny head.

"Directly," he said, and jerked his head toward a back door.

Quick alarm in his round eyes, Seth Tarn followed the tall gunman into the shadowy back room.

"Then two babes in the woods," Flash clipped. "Who are they, and what're they doin' here?"

Tarn shrugged thick shoulders, grinned. "Just a coupla drifters. Don't you go jumpin' at conclusions, Flash. Them two know all the ropes—"

"The truth, you fat spider, or I'll slit your throat!" Flash Hayden said flatly.

TARN RECOILED from the stark savagery in Flash Hayden's cold eyes. "The boy's name's Jim Barry. The girl's his wife—they just been married a few days. They were drivin' through the country in a buckboard, on their way to Sangaroon where he's got an uncle. They're new to the West, so they got lost. Then they saw my place, and stopped and asked if they could stay all night. I couldn't refuse a little thing like that, could I?"

"Maybe you'll wish you had!"

"Now wait a minute, Flash," Tarn whined. "You better not horn into this play. If you do Nick Scarlett 'll kill yuh, cause he's made up his mind to get the girl. It won't be the first girl he's stolen and carried into the hills. Besides, ain't nothin' I kin do. I don't want no trouble here. You don't aim to horn in, do you, Flash?"

"No!"Flash Hayden said fiercely, with sudden decision. He whirled and went back into the barroom.

Tarn followed him, a sly, satisfied grin curling his thick lips. "Take it easy, Flash," he said. "I'll take care of you."

"I'll take care of myself," Flash rapped. "Whiskey!"

Eagerly, Tarn seized the jug and sloshed more of the vile whiskey into the glass. Flash Hayden lifted the glass and gulped a deep swallow of the stuff.

Then, savagely, he smashed the glass against the bar. Fierce, savage anger leaped into this yellow eyes, and lushed out at Seth Tarn like a thing alive. Tarn, quick terror supplanting the evil triumph that had seeped into his dull eyes, cowered back againts the wall.

"Blast you, Tarn," Flash Hayden's passions peared furiously out at him. "I'll teach you to dope my whiskey!"

"Wait, Flash!" Tarn gibbered. "Yuh got me wrong. I didn't..."

Like a leaping black spider, Seth Tarn slid to one side, grabbing desperately for the gun on his hip. A red funnel of flame spewed across the bar, a gun-shot roared out, and Tarn wilted to the floor, the hate and vicious triumph draining from his snakish eyes as he died.

Flash Hayden whirled, back to the bar, gun-muzzele sweeping the room. He was conscious of a slow mist clouding his brain, of a fiery twisting in his stomach, and he knew that even the small amount of doped whiskey that he'd swallowed was having its effect. Fresh anger tore like a raging wind through his heart.

Silence held the big room. The boy and girl sat tense, seemingly bewildered by what was happening. A triumphant sneer curled Nick Scarlett's thin lips as he looked at Flash Hayden.

"You put that spider up to this, Scarlett," the gunman ripped out harshly. "Didn't have the guts to face me fair, even with your wolves at your back, did you? Well, all the cards ain't out in this game yet. Some day, I'll kill you for this!"

Stiff-legged, gun in one hand and money sack in the other, Flash Hayden backed to the door. The deadly drug in the whiskey was clutching with black fingers at his brain. The room reeled crazily before his eyes. Only one thing stood out clearly—the white, terror-haunted face of the girl.

Flash Hayden turned, staggered into the night. Dazedly, he reeled to the big gelding pulled himself into the saddle, and the night swallowed him as he spurred wildly away.

After riding furiously for a mile. Flash slowed the big gelding. He rode stiff in the saddle, clutching the saddlehorn for support. Fiercely he fought the drug that was trying to pull him from the saddle.

Chaos gripped his mind. Clashing emotions roiled in his heart. Memory of the young girl's white face and wide, pleading eyes fought with the knowledge that somewhere in the night, not far away now, a law posse was closing in on him. Already, perhaps, others had whipped in between him and the hills.

Flash Hayden cursed bitterly, and rode on. He was alternately hot and cold. Nausea tore at his stomach. A dark mist, agitated by fierce winds, seemed to swirl in his brain. But he never lost consciousness.

A chill night wind washed against his face, driving out some of the mist. But bleak, bitter reverie still moulded his hard face into a somber mask.

ONCE FLASH HAYDEN had killed a drunken miner for an insulting word spoken to a dance hall flossie. And yet he was riding away, the picture of a bewildered, frightened girl swimming in his mind, leaving that girl in the evil, merciless clutches of a human wolf—Nick Scarlett.

Flash Hayden grinned sardonically in the darkness. Satan's Segundo.... The words beat in his tired brain. Flash thought of the men he had killed.

But he could remember no time when he failed to drag his guns in defense of a woman....

Flash Hayden stopped the gelding suddenly. Abruptly his brain was clear, cold, calculating. He knew he should be racing on toward the hills. He knew that it meant almost certain death to return to Tarn's place—if not from Nick Scarlett's wolves, then from the posses that were hemming in. Only in the dark hills lay safety.

But now indecision no longer tormented Flash Hayden's mind. He whirled the gelding suddenly, sent him pounding back through the night....

His gaunt, sinister, figure filled the doorway of the barroom. He stood hunched forward as his cold eyes probed about the room.

Already Nick Scarlett had drooped his mask of suavity, bared his fangs. Young Jim Morgan sat with head and shoulders draped limply across the table, blood streaming from a gash on his forehead. The youth was unconscious.

Nick Scarlett and his three henchmen stood at the bar, talking and laughing with ribald glee, glasses of raw whiskey upraised in their filthy hands. The dudish Nick Scarlett was holding the girl in his arms.

The girl, terror-stricken, fought desperately, despairingly. She fastened her white teeth in Scarlett's shoulder. Nick Scarlett squalled with pain, swung his open palm against the girl's face.

Flash Hayden's voice, ragged with unchained passions, lashed across the room; "Scarlett, a gent that'll do that ain't fit to live!"

The four men at the bar whirled, stark surprise wiping the evil merriment from their faces. The girl twisted from Scarlett's grasp, ran toward the renegade.

Flash Hayden flung her fiercely

aside, never taking his eyes from the four before him. The girl, sensing that a holocaust of flame and lead was about to explode in that room, slid through the doorway into the corridor.

A blazing gun-battle exploded in a cyclonic burst of fury. Guns thundered out their ragged red dirge of death. Searing tongues of powder-flame criss-crossed the room as Flash Hayden—gunman, killer, feared and hated ever by his own kind—stood, a sardonic grin pulling his thin lips, and faced Nick Scarlett's gun-slicks in a gun-duel.

Bitter gunsmoke roiled thick in the room that was interlaced with scarlet ropes of flame. Gun-thunder rolled like drum beats through the low hills....

Ten minutes later, drawn by the blasting guns, a dozen possemen, led by a rawboned old sheriff, dragged their mounts to a halt at Tarn's place. A white-faced, frightened girl ran out to meet them, telling a fantastic tale. The rawboned old sheriff led his possemen into the big, smoke-fogged room.

Death greeted them. Nick Scarlett and his three gunnies were dead. Flash Hayden—dead. Young Jim Barry had regained consciousness, and now he took his dark-eyed young bride in his arms.

The old sheriff ordered the bodies taken into the open. Then he gathered kindling, struck a match to it, and a while later a writhing red tongue of flame roared up as Seth Tarn's place burned.

The bodies of Nick Scarlett and his henchmen were carried out to Jacktown for burial, and the rewards that had been offered for their capture collected.

But they buried Flash Hayden out there in the shadowy, silent hills, and the huge bounty that was offered for his capture, dead of alive, was never collected. At the head of the lonely grave the old sheriff placed a wooden slab.

And with a live firebrand he wrote:

FLASH HAYDEN
HE LIVED A WOLF
BUT HE DIED A MAN

● END

THE ROUGH THREE

(Cont'd from page 62)

The short man shifted his chew. "Reckon so, Mike," he said, "but it all sounds loco to me..."

Carpenter said, "All right, Mike, we draw straws, an' Talbeau can hold them."

From a tall clump of beargrass Talbeau selected two straws and put them in his hand, and then he turned scowling and said, "All right, Mike, you draw first. Long straw gits to shoot first."

Mike Fink scowled at the shortness of his straw, but his frown changed to a wide grin when he saw the very short straw drawn by Carpenter.

"You shoot first, Mike," the Frenchman said.

MIKE FINK paced off the distance, taking giant strides. The squaw had a doubtful look on her face. Carpenter also appeared worried. For once doubt was seeping into him, and he wondered if Mike would play this honestly. His doubt must have been great, for he motioned Talbeau to one side out of earshot of the big trapper.

"Look, Talbeau," he whispered hoarsely, "I don't trust Mike too much. But a bargain is a bargain, an' I'll go through with it. But if anything happens to me, you git everything I has in this life. My furs, my knife, my long-gun, my side-arm—you get them all, savvy?"

"Hell, Carpenter, Mike is a honest man!"

"Jes,' remember what I said."

By this time the big moccasins of Mike Fink had paced the distance, and he whirled with a roar.

"Git thet can on your head!"

Carpenter arranged the can and stood rigid, an arrow in the sun. The squaw watched, mouth open but without a word. Talbeau chewed tobacco and was vigilant. Slowly Mike Fink lifted his short-gun. He steadied the weapon, arm a solid rock.

The hammer fell.

(please turn to page 98)

GRAB A HORSE, HELLION - OR A GUN!

by JOHN G. PEARSOL

The kid had the two outlaws sewed up.

Jim Deever liked to remember the day he'd hung up his guns, so folks could't say young Brad's old man was an owlhooter. That's what made it so hard, taking his guns down again . . . .

JIM DEEVER looked older than forty-one. His white hair, the stoop in his shoulders, the crowfeet at the corner of his eyes, make him look fifty. Beside the pole corral in the ranchyard he stood and watched the buckboard as young Brad Deever drove it over the rise and out of sight. Jim Deever figured the kid was twenty years old, counted his birthdays from the time he had found him, a mite of a baby, the only survivor in a wrecked stage coach that had gone over a cliff. Before he found the kid Jim Deever had been crooked as hell. But in the last twenty years he'd been straight. Jim Deever liked to remember that.

He turned from where he stood at the corral, stared at the two men who stood near the door of the cabin. They were Jake Serle and Pinto Simms, and a haunted look sprang into Jim Deever's eyes as he moved

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slowly toward them.

"So you come back," said Jim Deever as he stopped. "I told you not to."

Jake Serle smiled—crookedly, from the corner of his mouth.

"We're in a jam," he said. "We need you. There's a bank to rob and two men ain't enough. We have to have another man, and you're it."

Jim Deever shook his head.

"Not me," he said definitely. "I've been straight twenty years. It's hard for me to remember when I was crooked."

Pinto Simms chuckled.

"The law could remember," he said suggestively, "if a hint was dropped that Jim Deever is the fellow that used to call himself the Brazos Kid."

That haunted look deepened in Jim Deever's eyes. A bitter smile tinged his lips.

"I know I'm in a spot," he said. "I know you'd do anything to get what you want. But listen to me and maybe you'll have a heart. Maybe you'll realize how much bein' square means to me."

Both Jake Serle and Pinto Simms smiled skeptically, looked bored, impatient.

"I never told you about the button," Jim went on. "I found him in a smashed up stage coach. Everybody was dead except him. He had a locket with his name in it about his neck and I discovered that he was Guy Rank's baby. Rank's wife was dead in the coach. I took the kid and wrote Rank a letter, and told him I had his brat and would make an outlaw out of him. I hated Sheriff Guy Rank more than anybody on earth. I did that to get even with him. I thought that was smart as hell."

OLD JIM DEEVER stopped, smiled and went on again.

"But I discovered it wasn't smart. I had to take care of th' baby. I fed him and put him to sleep and pretty soon I begun to think he was cute as hell. He'd take hold of my finger and laugh when I tried to pull it away. He was a strong little son of a gun, and he was a pretty healthy baby."

Simms and Serle were grinning sardonically.

"I was running like hell from Guy Rank," Jim went on. "He chased me all over the southwest to try to get his boy. And while I was runnin' from him I begun to realize that I wasn't as much afeared of Guy Rank gettin' me as I was of him takin' the boy away from me. The kid was doin' things to me. He could grin at me and I was sunk. He could cry and I dam' near went crazy wonderin' what was wrong with him. I woke up all of a sudden and knew I wanted to be a pretty swell gent so the kid would think as much of me as I did of him. In fact I thought so much of him that I started to take him back to give him to his father. I wanted him to have an old man that was honest. But just then I heard that Guy Rank had been killed. So I turned honest myself. I haven't done a crooked thing in twenty years. I've told you gents that I was straight before this. But that's why. That's why it's definite as hell. I wouldn't steal a nickel for anything on earth. I want that young fellow that just drove the buckboard away from here to be proud of me. Sabe? Now you go on about your business."

Serle's expression didn't change. Pinto Simms spat a long stream of tobacco juice out in front of him and sneered.

"We still need a third man to rob a bank," said Serle. "Get a gun and a horse. Go with us or we'll tip the law off about the Brazos Kid. It's just one of them things, Jim. Two of us can't do the job, and we don't know who else to get. So you're it. You go with us run from the law. You better hurry. We want to get to Tornillo early."

Old Jim Deever seemed to shrink up within himself a little as he stood there studying those two faces before him. He took a deep breath. He knew damn well they'd tip of the law if he didn't do what they asked him to do. If they did that it was a cinch the kid would know, and Jim Deever would be running from the law again. But it was a gamble that if he went with them that he could get away. Maybe the law would never know

he was in on it. Maybe they'd be satisfied and not come back again, or maybe he could throw a monkey wrench in their machinery on the way to Tornillo, or while they were there....

"Okay," said Jim Deever tiredly. "I'll get a horse..."

Tornillo's street was deserted. Between Serle and Simms, Jim Deever rode up its sun-baked length. It was hot and the blazing sun made heat waves dance up from the dust and off the false-fronted buildings. Two slack-hipped ponies switched lazy tails at flies as they stood at a hitch-rail. Jim Deever felt a queer cold desperation come to him as he realized that there was nothing he could do to keep Simms and Serle from robbing the bank. They had ridden all night to reach Tornillo, and he'd tried all night to think of something to do. But there was nothing. If he made a break he'd die and if he didn't die the law would know he'd been the Brazos Kid.

THEY STOPPED in front of the bank. Jake Serle got off his horse.

"Come on," he said low-voiced to Jim Deever, "and be damn careful how you act. I'm gonna watch you like a hawk. I've got a hunch you'd be a damn fool enough to try to queer this deal if you had a chance."

Jim Deever climbed down off his horse. He knew he'd try to queer the deal if he had a chance. But he didn't have a chance. He followed Serle into the bank. The bank was empty except for the cashier. Jake Serle pointed a gun at him.

"Shell out!" he said curtly. "Sack up your money and make it fast!"

The cashier, a thin, pale-faced man, grew even paler as he started shoving bundles of money into a canvas sack. He filled one and Jake Serle waved his gun.

"Get it," he said to Jim Deever.

Jim Deever reached through the grille and took the money sack.

"There's more," said Jake Serle to the cashier. "Give us all of it."

The cashier filled two more sacks and Jim Deever gathered them up in his hands.

"You see now why we need you," Jake Serle said to Deever. "Get the hell out of here! Quick!"

Jim Deever started toward the door. Out in front of the bank Pinto Simms yelled. A gun crashed up the street as Deever and Jake Serle ran down the steps. A tall, lean, black-hatted man came running down the street, a gun in his hand. He shot and the bullet whistled past Deever's head. Jim Deever stared at him as he'd stare at a ghost. It was Guy Rank! He was older, but Jim Deever would have known him anywhere. He was young Brad's father and Jim Deever, who never had been to this distant town of Tornillo, had thought him dead! He had heard, nearly twenty years ago, that he'd been killed!

A lot of guns began to crackle and snarl and roar as Deever and Serle hit their saddles, galloped away.

"Ride fast," yelled Jake Serle to Jim Deever. "If you slow up I'll kill you!"

Jim Deever rode like mad. He was in a frenzy of dread. He was as anxious to get away as Jake Serle was. The rattle of guns and shrill yells behind him beat against his ears; but the mystery of Guy Rank, still alive, beat against his brain. Like a grim spectre out of the past, he was back there, blazing guns in his hands.

A horrible, clutching fear that Guy Rank would catch him, expose him now to young Brad, clutched old Jim Deever, and he rode as he had never ridden before. The wind plastered his shirt to his body as he thundered along. His hat was blown from his head. Crazily, around and round in his brain, went the thought that he couldn't bear to give up the boy to Guy Rank now. He'd had him too long. He loved him too much. He'd watched him grow up from a baby to be a man. He'd been ready to give him to Guy Rank once, but not now!

Gradually, Jim Deever knew that no posse as yet had been organized to take their trail. Only the pound of their own horses' hoofs was in his ears. But he didn't let his horse falter. He drove it on mercilessly, cruelly. And night came again, and they pushed on. Jim Deever knew they'd have to hurry, knew that Guy

Rank wouldn't stop. Guy Rank was a blood-hound.

THEY RODE all night again. They came in sight of the cabin as the sun came up over the hills. Jim leaped from his horse in the ranchyard, saw young Brad standing in the doorway, watching them curiously. Jake Serle dismounted from his spent horse, ran to the corral with a rope in his hand. Pinto Simms stayed back and watched Jim Deever while Serle roped and saddled two horses. Jim Deever set the canvas sacks down on the ground, grew cold as Jake Serle turned and stared at him.

Jake Serle smiled, looked for an instant at young Brad Deever there in the doorway, then at Jim Deever.

"I guess we're through with you," Serle said to Jim.

His hand whipped toward his gun. The pistol gilttered in the light. It spewed flame and smoke toward Jim Deever, and Jim felt an awful, searing agony in his side as he felt himself being smashed backward. He saw Jake Serle and Pointo Simms galloping away carrying the canvas sacks. He yelled at the kid to keep back, but the kid was shooting at Jake and Pinto. Then he knew that young Brad was bending over him. And a deep misery came to him as he guessed he was done. Guy Rank would come soon, and find him here, take the kid and take him away, and put Jim Deever in jail.

"I made a mess of things," Jim Deever said weakly to young Brad. "I was too scared to think straight. I used to be an outlaw, twenty years ago. I swore I'd never steal again. But these two gents that just rode away threatened me. I had to go with them. We robbed the bank at Tornillo. I'm a damned thief again!"

The weakening shock of his wound passed and Jim Deever rose, pressed his hand to his side. The kid was frowning, puzzled, concerned. He studied the misery in Jim Deever's eyes.

"This bullet's not bad," said Jim Deever. "I'm sorry as hell about this. I wouldn't have had you know what I'd been for anything on earth. But if I hadn't done it I'd of had to run, and you'd have known anyway. It was a chance I had to take. And now a posse's coming, but whatever happens, I want you to know I tried for twenty years to make you proud of me.

The kid's smile softened. A soft light glowed in his eyes.

"I've been proud of you," he said softly. "I still am proud of you, and to hell with a posse! We'll get away from the posse. I'll get the money from those two jaspers and give it back to the bank at Tornillo. We'll find a way to square this."

He hurried to the corral, got two fresh horses and saddled them.

"You hide while I go after them," the kid said.

Jim Deever shook his head.

"We'll both go," he told the boy. "I'm all right."

The kid helped Jim up into a saddle.

"Hang and rattle," he said, "we'll whip this. A man can't be honest for twenty years then let a couple of two-bit outlaws get the best of him. If we get that money back I've got a hunch the law will call it square. We can say they forced you into it with a gun because they didn't know the country."

THEY STARTED away and Jim Deever couldn't get the miracle of all this out of his mind. The kid had taken the fact that he'd been an outlaw without so much as batting an eyelash. He didn't give a damn what Jim Deever had been. It was what he was that counted and the kid was remembering the twenty years he'd been square.

Old Jim clung grimly to the saddle horn. He kept looking back, and it wasn't long till he saw the posse, saw the glitter of Guy Rank's badge in the light of the sun. Desperately, he raked his horse with his spurs, and they rode faster. The kid looked back too and saw the posse, and he turned the horses up into the hills, off of the trail, and up into the rocks.

"If we take this cut-off we can catch those jaspers," the kid told Jim. "There's only one way they

can get out of the country, and if we get there ahead of them we can stop 'em. Can you make it?"

Deever nodded, gripped his teeth as pain lanced through his wound. They climbed on and the world started to spin in old Jim Deever's eyes. He had chance to square again and keep the kid. Ten to one old Guy Rank wouldn't recognize him. Guy Rank hadn't changed much but Jim Deever had changed a lot; and hard times and bitter struggles and slaving work to make both ends meet had left their marks on old Jim Deever that were not on Guy Rank.

He raised a hand and rubbed his eyes and nearly fell from the saddle.

The kid stopped his horse and stared calculatingly at him, concern sobering his face.

"You're hurt worse than I thought," he said. "You better hide here while I go on."

Jim Deever shook his head.

"I can make it," he said grimly. He told himself he had to make it.

They went on again but in a few minutes Jim Deever knew he couldn't make it. He knew he was going to fall. The horses pounded up to the top of the rise and Jim could look down upon the trail below and see Jake Serle and Pinto Simms circling the butte. Old Deever tried to catch himself as he fell forward. Young Brad's arms shot out and caught him. The pound of Serle's and Simms' horses down below them was loud as the kid lay Jim down beside a great rock on the mountain side.

"You wait here until I get back," said the kid. "I'll fix everything. Don't you worry a bit."

"I'm not worried," lied old Jim.

Then the kid was up in the saddle again, thundering away, the mad tatoo of his horse's hoofs floating back to Jim Deever as he lay there.

Jim Deever propped himself up so he could look down on the trail and he saw Pinto Simms and Jake Serle flash past the place where the kid should have met them. But the kid was too late to stop them, and he dashed across the trail and stopped his horse at a rock nest that nestled in the center of a curve in the trail. He leaped from his horse and floppde down behind the rocks. His guns began to chatter and Jim Deever saw Simms and Serle flop off their horses and barricade themselves behind the rocks. They couldn't go on past where the kid was hidden. The kid had them sewed up!

THE RUMBLE of hoofs rose up above the chatter of guns, and Jim Deever realized that the posse was coming. The horrible thought struck him that the kid, stopping Serle and Simms where he had, had put himself between two fires. The kid was bottled up too! The posse wouldn't know that the kid was trying to get the money back for them. All they'd know would be that there were three men down there. And three men had robbed a bank. Guy Rank would try to kill his own son!

Jim Deever gave a half-articulate cry as he saw the posse flash into view. He saw them stop and watch the battle that raged on below them. They deployed and started to fire down at the kid where he crouched down beside the rock. They'd shoot him to ribbons! Jim Deever rose up on his feet and stumbled forward. He yelled, tried to scream to Guy Rank but his voice couldn't carry half the distance to where Guy Rank was.

The rattle of guns was a horrible, sinister sound to Jim Deever. Over and over again in his whirlng brain rang the thing that he thought he was yelling at Guy Rank, telling him to stop, telling him he was shooting his own boy!

But the guns kept on rattling and Jim stumbled on, falling, crawling, then rising up to stumble and fall again. His gun belt snagged, he unbuckled it, let it lay. He could not see Guy Rank nor any of the posse because they were around on the side of the hill. Jim Deever was between the kid and Simms and Serle. The kid was bloody. One arm hung limply down at his side. His shirt was torn and spotted where the bullets had wounded him.

Jim Deever could see that the Kid, trapped between two fires, wounded, shocked by bullets, dazed, didn't

know what he was doing. He shot first at Serle and Simms, then up at the posse. Jim Deever yelled huskily at the kid to stop and quit fighting. But his voice wouldn't reach to the kid either. The crackling snarl of the guns drowned it.

Jim Deever stumbled, fell, lay there at the edge of the basin and knew that he had to do something quick. While he watched, the kid sent a shot at Serle and Serle sprawled out from behind his rock and didn't get up again. But Simms kept on shooting. The posse kept on shooting. Jim Deever finally managed to push himself up on his feet again. He stepped out where everybody could see him. He knew he was going to die because Simms was sending bullet after bullet at him and the posse was shooting at him thinking him to be an outlaw.

ALL THE things that Jim Deever had tried to build for in the past twenty years were crumbled down about his ears now. No matter which way this went he was going to lose the kid. The kid's gun spoke again and Simms dived out from behind his rock and lay beside Serle. The kid, half blinded, turned his guns on Jim Deever and Jim called huskily to him and his voice carried now.

"Brad," he yelled, "it's me! Stop shooting! Stop fighting!"

The kid let his guns hand down in his hands and sank down beside the rock where the posse could't see him. Some of the posse kept shooting at Jim Deever till he crawled in behind the rock where the kid was hunkered. Jim reached out and took the guns from the kid's hands and tossed them away.

"The fight's all over," he said soothingly. "Everything's okay."

He heard the posse coming and he guessed that everything was okay for everybody but him. It was a heads-you-win-tails-I-lose game for Jim Deever. Then Guy Rank was standing there, his guns in his hands, staring down at Jim and the kid, looking a little puzzled as he saw that Deever didn't have a gun. The rest of the posse went over to the rock where Serle and Simms lay and one of them yelled back that they had the money. Jim Deever looked down at the kid, his head on his lap and the kid's eyes were closed. Jim saw that he was unconscious. He reached out and his hand shook a little as he pushed a damp lock of hair from the kid's forehead.

"I don't quite sabe this," said Guy Rank. "Three gents rob a bank and I think you were one of them. Then this young fellow jumps into the game and tries to stop two of the robbers. But this young fellow must be a friend of yours because you walk out here without any guns to try to get to him. If he was a friend of yours why has he trying to stop the gents that helped you?"

Jim Deever looked down at the kid again and his hand still trembled. He was glad the kid was unconscious because he wouldnt want him to hear what he was going to say. Guy could tell him after it was all over.

"I helped rob the bank," said Jim Deever. "I used to be an outlaw. But twenty years ago I stopped that and turned honest. Those two fellows over there threatened me. I went with them because I didnt want the boy to know what I'd been. They shot me when we got to my place. Me and the boy took after them. We thought mebbe if we could get the money back and tell it the way it was that the law would call it quits.

"I'm gonna tell you something else," he went on. "I'm gonna tell you because I'm gonna die. I'm not so sure I'd tell you if I was going to live. I don't believe I would because I think too much of this boy to lose him. I worked for him for twenty years. He's honest. He's fine. He's as good as you are, as good as any man alive. I want you to know that because he's your son and I'm the Brazos Kid! I walked out here to get the kid because I had to stop that fight. I had to keep you from killing him or him from killing you."

GUY RANK stood there for a minute and stared at Jim Deever and the kid. Then he squatted down

and reached out and touched the boy. He did it a little hesitantly, a little reverently, and his hand shook a little like Jim Deever's hand. Then Guy Rank looked at Jim Deever again. Jim Deever thought maybe Guy Rank was remembering him walking out into a hail of bullets to keep his son from being killed. Maybe Guy appreciated that because Rank's eyes had grown a little misty.

"I think you've made a mistake now," said Guy Rank. "I don't think you're gonna die. Mebbe I'm gonna make a mistake too but I'm gonna let the law keep on thinking that the Brazos Kid is dead. I'm not gonna prefer any charges against you. I think that a fellow who raises a boy up to be an honest man deserves to get a break. Honest men are scarce as hell."

Old Jim Deever closed his eyes weakly. He heard the rest of the posse coming back from where Serle and Simms were lying. He heard Guy Rank talking to them, telling them that Jim had participated in the bank robbery because the outlaws had forced him to it at the point of a gun, to show them the way out of the country, and that Jim Deever and the kid had fought the outlaws to try to get the money back.

"I'll vouch for them," said Guy Rank. "Get them up. Get them back to town to a doctor in a hurry!"

All of a sudden Jim Deever wondered if maybe Guy Rank wasn't right at that, if he wasn't mistaken when he said that he was going to die. He had an awful lot to live for now. He had a good name, and there was a young fellow who didn't give a damn about what he'd been. And there was an old sheriff who could look at human failings with human understanding and forgive them. Maybe if Jim gritted his teeth and hung on he would live, to watch the kid really amount to something with Guy Rank behind him. Maybe he could live for that. He tried. And he did... ●END

THE ROUGH THREE

(Cont'd from page 91)

The hammer was not the only thing that fell. Carpenter fell, too. He toppled to the ground, the unpunctured can falling beside him. Carpenter had lost the top of his head.

"Wahl I'll be swahed," Mike Fink marveled, squinting through the hanging powdersmoke. "But I does believe I missed the can."

The squaw was squealing with rage and loss, looking for a knife to use on Mike Fink. She was howling like a banshee. Talbeau stared at the dead man, then at Fink who was holstering his gun.

"You never missed thet close afore," Talbeau said huskily. "Always afore you shot the top off the can, not off'n his haid!"

"You think I kilt him on purpose?"

Mike Fink's heavy face was the color of a thunderhead over the Tetons. His hand was on his gun and evil was in his eyes. Talbeau knew he was in danger. If rumor got through the trapper clan that Mike had deliberately murdered his best friend, then Mike would get the rope... Maybe Mike Fink was thinking of this, too. Anyway, he pulled his gun against Talbeau.

And in so doing, Mike Fink made his last and final gesture—for Talbeau shot him neatly and convincingly through the heart.

Now two dead men, two giants of the forest, lay in tumbled death on the sod. The squaw's face was drained of blood, for this catastrophe had arrived with roaring suddenness. Then through her mental melee speared one thought: She wanted, above all, to be the spouse of a white man—no buck or half-breed for her! And accordingly her doe-soft eyes swung in moist admiration toward Talbeau.

"Now I have no man..."

Talbeau rose in grandiose splendor to the moment. A few strides forward brought them into each other's arms and the Frenchman felt the magnificent curves of the squaw against him.

"You have *me*," Talbeau said.

●END

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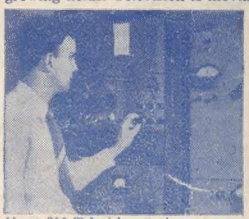

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